

Loser

infinitegalaxies

Star Wars Sequel Trilogy / Star Wars - All Media Types Complete



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Summary

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Description:

Rey is one of the most popular girls in school. She's also a cruel bully to her cousin Ben.

After a heated confrontation, they fall into a secret relationship. He learns to take what he can get, love it even.

That is, until she leaves him in the dust.

Ten years later, Rey is struggling to make ends meet and is facing eviction.

Fortunately, she has a job interview with Kylo Ren.

Unfortunately, he hasn't forgotten about her.

And he will make her pay.

Chapter 1

Ben watched from his bedroom window as the most popular kids in his high school lounged around his pool, splashing each other. Played volleyball. Jumped in cannonball style. Every girl was achingly hot, most of all his cousin, Rey.

It was a dream for any kid to have such an assemblage of high school royalty gracing their backyard on a Friday afternoon.

Only they weren't his friends and it wasn't his party.

Rey and her mom, Ben's aunt Mira, had moved in freshman year. Mr. Niima left their home in New Jersey one day for a pack of cigarettes and never came home. It was supposed to be temporary, but Rey was doing so well in school that his parents agreed that it made sense for them to stay with them in California until graduation. In the meantime, Mira was saving for a down payment on a place of her own in the treacherously pricey real estate market, and Rey dreamed of traveling back across the country for college.

He continued spying through the dusty slats of the blinds on his bedroom window. Unable to ignore the hard-on that had formed. He decided to just deal with it.

Trying his best to focus on anyone but *her*. Rose was beautiful and had an amazing rack. Jannah was adorable but shy, always off to the side reading a book but still able to chime in at the right time with a perfect joke that made everyone laugh.

Kaydel was chaotic and flirty, always jumping on everyone and loudly proclaiming her crushes. She'd touched his arm once and he'd frozen in terror.

"I don't know! I tried. Maybe he's gay."

Today they had the basketball team over. Armie Hux. Poe Dameron. Cal Kestis. Yesterday it was the lacrosse team. Finn Storm. Beau Kin. Snap Wexley.

Every single one of them had had a laugh at his expense one time or another. He had learned just to stay out of the way, soon becoming a prisoner in his own home.

Sure he could go to the library, or the comic book store. But he was drawn to the window like a moth to the flame. Painfully eager to observe a life that would never be his.

He stroked himself with a tight fist, eyes wandering from bikini to bikini.

But without fail, his gaze always turned back to Rey. Her perfectly round ass. Her toothy grin. Her fucking freckles. Those little mouthful tits.

It hadn't always been like this—being separated by popularity politics and a pane of glass. The first year she moved in they were thick as thieves. Helping each other feed their broccoli to the dog under the table, studying together, watching cheesy movies under a shared blanket. They'd get into tickle fights and play video games. Sometimes, when she had trouble sleeping, she'd even crawl into bed with him. All totally innocent, even if he had trouble with boners from time to time.

Then, the summer after freshman year, Rey tried out for cheer, and made it. He was so proud of her for finding her place, even if he thought sports were stupid. Only he didn't realize how quickly she would leave him in the dust.

"Everyone says you're a weirdo. I guess I didn't want to see it because you've always been there for me. But I need to make real friends, Ben. You understand, right?"

At first, he had thought it was only a phase. That she'd just done it to survive the gauntlet of high school, and things wouldn't change much between them at home. He knew he was social napalm and he would hurt her chances of keeping up with the in crowd, and he wanted her to be happy.

He figured it was just a mask she had to put on, like everyone did to get through the day.

She was still his Rey.

That was, until she started enjoying watching him suffer.

Just like the rest of them.

It had been three years now, and it had only gotten worse. It was as if their bond had never even existed.

"God Ben, lighten up. Don't be such an easy target then. I mean, look at what you're wearing!"

His hatred began to grow and fester, and concurrently, so did his sickening desire for her.

Maybe there was something deeply wrong with him. How much he wanted the girl who laughed as he was tripped and kicked and called a fucking nerd every day.

It wasn't anything new, being bullied. Having no friends. Why should it be any different coming from her? Besides, he was the weird one, after all.

He didn't get their jokes, or their taste in clothes and music. Their fascination with being liked. Every last one of them was a fucking moron. Why would he want to be anything like them? Being the object of their derision was practically a compliment.

In five to ten years, he'd be running his own startup and they'd be in sad, unfulfilling marriages with minivans full of brats. He'd forget they even existed.

He continued watching Rey frolic in the pool, jerking himself faster as she fought Rose while mounted atop Poe's shoulders for a game of Chicken. Giggling and shrieking, her little tits bounced and threatened to burst from her tiny string bikini top.

She soon lost, screaming as she plunged into the pool. Moments later, she emerged like a siren, flipping her hair and splashing palmfuls of water at Rose and Armie.

Her top had been pushed aside during her fall, revealing just a hint of dusky pink areola.

He came almost instantly at the sight, cursing as he tried in vain to capture the spurts of cum that escaped against his will and splashed the wall next to his window.

Fucking pathetic.

"Ben? Honey! Can you come down? I need help!"

His mother's voice traveled up the stairs and he cursed, fumbling to clean himself up with a discarded t-shirt from the floor.

"Yeah! Just a second!" he called back, nearly tripping as he pulled up his basketball shorts and stumbled to the door.

He washed his hands in the hall bathroom and bounded down the stairs, finding his mom holding a freshly laundered stack of towels.

"Can you please bring these outside to the kids?"

"Yeah no. There's no way I'm going out there. Why can't you do it?"

His mother nodded toward the kitchen. "Because I've got three pounds of meat to grill, not that you offered to help. Don't be a brat, just help your mother!" she snapped.

He shook his head and took the pile reluctantly. He could just chuck them out the back door and go back to his room and hide.

Unfortunately for him, his mother had eyes in the back of her head.

"Ben, what are you doing?" she shouted as she checked on a pan of mac and cheese in the oven. "Bring them outside, don't just dump my clean towels on the ground!"

"Mom, don't make me go out there, everyone hates me."

"Oh nonsense, how could anyone not love my amazing little boy?"

He groaned, his back to the door. Was he really going to do this? Maybe he could be quick.

"Fine. But that's it for the day. I'm really not comfortable, mom."

He didn't have the heart to tell her what his life was truly like. How he was truly only someone a mother could love.

"Of course, honey," she responded absentmindedly, turning her back to a pile of hot dog buns on a tray. "Thank you, my baby!"

As he stepped outside, everyone seemed distracted by a game of water volleyball. He breathed a sigh of relief and headed towards the nearest table to drop the towels on and retreat.

Just as he turned to go back inside, a ball hit him square on the back of the head.

"Bingo!" a deep voice shouted from the pool. "You owe me ten bucks, Castis!"

Fucking Dameron.

He scrunched up his shoulders and kept walking.

"Hey, dickwad. Where you goin? Don't you wanna play with us?" Hux's voice followed. "Don't be such a party pooper."

He tried to ignore him, he really did. Instead, he turned around.

"Sorry, I don't party with anyone with IQs as low as yours."

"Ha ha. Good one, nerd!" Cal taunted him. "Gimme your math homework, Dumbo."

Going for his ears. So fucking creative.

“Fuck off,” Ben shouted back.

“Oh, that was a big mistake, Solo,” Armie responded with faux sternness as he left the pool.

The girls just watched on, amused. Not a single one of them gave a shit.

Especially *her*.

Ben stood, fists clenched.

“What, you’re gonna kick my ass at my own house? While my mom makes you fucking hot dogs?” he sneered at one of his many bullies.

“Oh no, Benji,” Armie smiled. “We’re just having a little fun.”

It caught him off guard. Usually Armie was more than happy to punch him directly in the gut or flip him around for a wedgie.

Instead, he felt the cool air on his ass cheeks as Kaydel snuck up behind him and dragged his shorts and boxers down in one fell swoop.

“Damn, I didn’t know Solo was packing!” Jannah called out from her perch on a nearby chaise.

“Do you think it floats?” Armie grinned as he shoved Ben into the pool.

For a brief moment, he wished to simply drown. To hit his head on the bottom and never come back up.

At least they all knew he had a big dick now.

To his disappointment, he floated back up to the surface, recovering his trunks as he gasped for air and waded over to the ladder.

He couldn’t hear them, he told himself. The laughter. The cheers. But he still heard Rey ask Jannah if she was sure it was that big or if her eyes were playing tricks on her.

Without a glance back, he grabbed a towel off the table and stomped back into the house, letting the door slam behind him.

“Oh sweetie, come on. You gotta dry off before you come inside, please!”

Ben didn’t stop until he reached his room, closing the door safely behind him before he let himself shed a single tear.

After a shower, a meal of the cold burger left outside his bedroom door, and an hour of video games, he removed his headphones to find that the voices in the backyard had finally dwindled down to silence, replaced by the steady hum of crickets.

He was still fucking furious.

Maybe it was time to finally confront her. Find out why she found his misery so goddamn amusing. Maybe she could stop hosting pool parties so he could actually live freely in his own goddamn house. It was enough that he had to be humiliated at school every fucking day.

At last, he'd reached his breaking point.

He threw on a t-shirt and tightened the drawstring on his shorts just in case, and stalked down to the pool house.

Mira was away for business, and he knew Rey was alone.

As he approached, he saw the cherry of a lit cigarette floating in the darkness at the end of the stone path leading to the house.

"My mom's gonna kill you if she finds out," he couldn't help but declare.

"Relax, narc."

Rey emerged from the shadows, still wearing her bikini and crouched down to stub the cigarette out on the pavement.

"Don't worry, I'll flush it," she added, holding it up for him to examine. "Anything else I can help you with?"

"We need to talk," he insisted, following her inside.

She huffed a laugh as she tossed the cigarette in the toilet of the small bathroom near the door.

"About what?" She made her way into the small kitchenette, pulled a White Claw out of the fridge and took a sip.

"You can't keep treating me like this. You and your stuck up friends."

"Says who?"

"Did you forget where you came from? That you're freeloading off *my* family?"

"I didn't ask to be a charity case," she shrugged. "And it's not my fucking *fault* people like me. Maybe you should try not being such a fucking buzzkill and maybe you'd make some friends too."

"Fuck you."

She took another sip, scowling. "This tastes like shit." She turned and poured it down the drain, the sound of liquid echoing off the sides of the metal sink. "Hate me all you want but I'm just calling it like I see it. It's like you're *trying* to be a loser."

She laughed. She fucking laughed at him.

"I do fucking hate you," he spoke sternly.

She shrugged.

He saw red. He wanted to make her feel an ounce of the pain she and her friends had caused him. Without thinking he rushed towards her and grabbed her by the throat.

She seemed temporarily surprised, a small victory as he backed her into her nearby bedroom.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

He threw her down on the bed. She bounced gently on the mattress, awkwardly trying to regain stability with her elbows as he towered over her, seething.

“Am I a fucking joke to you? Is my whole existence just one big fucking laugh for you and your little friends?”

He knew the answer but he wanted her to admit it.

She shook her head. “Um yeah, I guess. I mean what if it is, Benjamin? What are you gonna do about it?” She licked her lips, a smirk curling them at one corner.

Even in her cruelty, she was still the most beautiful woman he’d ever laid eyes on. His eyes traveled up and down her lithe, tanned body.

Maybe he should just do what he’d always wanted to do to her. She wouldn’t be able to laugh with his cock down her throat, would she?

His knees hit the bed and he gathered both of her wrists, pinning them to the mattress above her head.

“You know I can take whatever I want, right? You may be the world’s biggest bitch but I’m stronger than you. Maybe that’ll finally shut you the fuck up?”

She snickered, “You’re too chicken shit,” then sneered, “I’d like to see you try.”

Chapter 2

Nothing phased her. *Nothing*.

Two could play this game.

As if it had a mind of its own, his free hand tore at her bikini top. He got his fill, staring at her taut nipples, hardening in front of his eyes.

“Is that all you got?” she teased with a sly grin, noticeably squirming beneath him, her chest rising and falling faster.

“You have no idea how *giving* I can be,” he spat back with a rough thrust of his hips against her center.

He watched the defiant spark leave her eyes as his grip on her wrists tightened and his other hand moved to close around her throat.

“When you moved in with us, you were so desperate, so poor. With your hand-me-downs and your home haircuts. I thought, *‘finally’* someone who might help me feel less alone.”

She pressed her lips together, looking down intently as his fingers left her neck, traced over her collarbones and down the center of her chest.

“And you did, for a while. We were friends for about what, five minutes? Until you made it on the cheer squad and started fucking every jock in school.”

“I never—”

If his heart softened towards her, it was only for a split second.

“Okay, at least that’s what you want people to think, huh? But what would your friends think if they found out you fucked *me*?”

“You *wish*,” she smirked, only to close her eyes and shiver as his finger traced her nipple.

The affect he had on her was palpable. It made him feel invincible.

“Your body says *you’re* the one who wishes,” he taunted her softly, his finger trailing down her belly and just beneath the waistband of her swimsuit. “We both know what I’m gonna find down here.”

Her wrists relaxed in his grip and her body softened in response to his touch. He released her wrists and rested his elbow on the bed, laying beside her. He resumed his exploration beneath her waistband.

“I dare you,” she whispered defiantly, eyes locked on his. Her arms remained stretched above her head, and his eyes roamed her body, taking in her perfect breasts and tanned, pebbled skin. He wanted to devour her until there was nothing left. Until he was victorious.

He accepted the dare, sliding his fingers down past her curls and into the valley of her sex.

“Why aren’t you trying to stop me?” he asked shakily as he parted her lips and unleashed a torrent of slick. He slipped a finger inside of her and she clenched around it.

“I wanna see,” she responded, her expression twitching as he pulled his finger back out and traced it upwards to circle her clit. She closed her eyes.

“See what?”

“How giving you are.”

It was all the invitation he needed, to kiss her roughly, and cover her body with his.

She kissed him back and slid her hands up under his shirt, urging him to pull it over his head before reaching down to yank at the drawstring he’d tied tight before venturing downstairs.

Her slim hand reached inside regardless, wrapping around his aching hard shaft.

He waited for the rude remark, the taunting words.

“Holy shit, Jannah wasn’t lying,” she gasped between kisses.

He reared up and pulled his shorts down himself.

“How’s it look now?” he asked breathily, grabbing the back of her neck to lift her upwards until her face was directly in front of it.

To his surprise, she opened her mouth and grasped him at the base, directing his head past her soft pink lips.

With her eyes closed, she sucked him off greedily, using her saliva to lubricate his length in her small fist.

Even in his disbelief, he still wanted to punish her, grabbing the back of her head to start fucking her face. His eyes widened in disbelief as he watched her gag and choke and sputter.

It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, her struggling for once. Trapped. Powerless. He couldn’t help himself from spilling down the back of her throat all too quickly.

In spite of his roughness, she eagerly swallowed him down, and wiped the small amount that escaped her lips with the back of her hand.

“Damn, Ben,” she panted, looking up at him with something akin to respect. “I didn’t think you actually had it in you.”

No one was more surprised than him. Post-orgasm, he felt chagrined. She was his cousin. His tormentor. What had he just done?

“I— I should go,” he stammered, backing away and standing, reaching to pull his shorts up.

“No! You’re not fucking leaving,” she retorted, scooting forward on the bed to follow him. She untied her bikini top the rest of the way and tossed it aside as she joined him in standing.

“What do you mean?”

“So much for being *giving*,” she scoffed, putting air quotes around the word giving before crossing her arms over her chest. ‘You’re not even gonna *try* to fuck me?’ She rolled her eyes. “Virgin behavior.”

“I’m not a—” he paused.

But he was. He was a fucking virgin. But she didn’t need to know that. The darkest part of him responded to her temptation. At the very least, he had to call her bluff.

“Beg me.”

“Beg you to what?” She laughed. Nothing could stop her from being amused by him, apparently.

“To fuck you,” he responded coldly, walking slowly back towards her and the bed. “Beg me and I’ll fuck you.”

“Oh, Ben,” she whined playfully, pressing her palms together in prayer. “Please fuck me with your big beautiful dick. Pretty, pretty please.”

He knew she was making fun of him, but it was the most beautiful combination of sounds he’d ever heard from her lips. He felt even more emboldened and less hesitant. So what if he was about to fuck his cousin?

Their mutual destruction was assured.

“That’s better. Now get on all fours,” he commanded, swirling his index finger towards the ground, to instruct her to turn around.

She complied with an amused smile and peered back at him over her shoulder.

“How’s this you little perv?”

“Better. You little *slut*.”

Her expression was surprised and pleased as she turned away and waited for him to make a move.

It was easier if he didn’t have to look her in the eye, he reassured himself. She wouldn’t see how badly he wanted her. How much of a dream come true this was, however fucked up it truly was.

He knelt on the floor at the foot of the bed and grasped both of her thighs, pulling her closer. He wanted—no needed—to taste her. He would take his time. Take everything he’d ever wanted.

“What are you—ah!”

“Shut the fuck up,” he demanded, slapping her ass brusquely as he continued licking her soft, sweet pussy from behind. Each lick was exquisite, from the way she smelled and tasted, to the way she wiggled her ass a little and whimpered each time his tongue hooked around her clit. The best part was pressing his tongue deep inside and thrusting it in and out as he rubbed sloppy circles into her clit from below.

“Ben! Fuck, I’m gonna—”

“Good. Cause I’m not gonna be gentle.”

She quivered and squirmed as she cried out her release. Greedily, he lapped at the rush of slick that burst over his tongue, fisting himself in anticipation.

“Are you on birth control?” he double checked as he rose to standing. Knocking up his cousin senior year was not part of this dream. He pushed her further onto the bed to kneel behind her, his heart pounding.

“Yeah,” she panted. “Just fucking do it.”

Taking her at her word, he braced one palm on her ass and used the other hand to guide the head of his cock through her slippery folds, pressing inside. She was still pulsing with the remnants of her climax.

A loud grunt escaped his throat as he pushed inside, using both hands to brace himself on her hips.

“Ah, fuck!” she cried out as he pushed all the way in.

Her tight, wet heat was beyond his wildest imaginings of what a pussy might feel like.

If not for the blow job, he might have blown his load instantly, for how good it felt to have her wrapped around him like this.

After a few tentative thrusts, he took her moans as cart blanche to fuck her as hard as he needed to, pulling her arms back by the wrists as he pounded into her, before grabbing her by the throat to bring her upright against his chest.

He felt her come a second time as he gripped her neck in one hand and both her tits in the other. Never had he felt more powerful or invincible.

As he filled his tormentor with his cum, he briefly imagined a life in which they could be happy. In which she’d defend him, take his side.

Maybe even love him.

Just as soon as he’d emptied his balls and his soul, he was slipping out, and letting her fall limply to the bed. She gathered herself, rising up to sitting, and curled her arms around her knees.

In his post orgasmic clarity, he knew that there would be no such romantic fantasy beyond what they’d just shared. Not that it wouldn’t happen again, that felt almost inevitable. But they’d cracked open something between them, a Pandora’s box of chaos that could never be closed again.

But mutually assured destruction had never felt so good.

“Fuck, Solo. You’re an animal,” she huffed a laugh. It almost sounded as if she respected him, if only for this brief moment.

He swiped a hand through his hair and stood to grab his clothes.

“Yeah, well. I, uh—”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything else,” she offered, a small kindness. “See you at breakfast.”

He’d fucked his cousin. His asshole bully of a cousin. And there was no way he was just going to move on from this. But he was almost relieved that she didn’t want to talk. Maybe if they didn’t say too much out loud, they could contain the fallout somehow.

She stood and pushed past him, closing the bathroom door behind her, effectively dismissing him.

And so, it began.

Chapter 3

At school Rey was as cruel to him as ever. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but it wasn't having to watch her flirting with other guys right in front of him in the hall. Guys she wasn't even dating and definitely wasn't sleeping with.

He knew because he could hear them complain in the locker room and the bathrooms when they thought no one was listening.

"She's a fuckin' prude bro. Don't waste your time."

"Blue balls dude. Nothin' but blue balls."

Along with everyone else, she'd still laugh and point when they shoved him into lockers and knocked his tray out of his hands at lunch.

She ignored him, even when no one else could see, except to join in on making fun of him. At first, it was confusing, if not reassuring. For a full week, everything was as it should be, and what happened between them felt like it was probably just a lark.

But that homeostasis was merely temporary. He'd been right after all — what had cracked open between them could not be stuffed back in. The toothpaste was out of the tube.

The first knock on his bedroom door the following Friday had surprised him. Then, he began to expect it.

Eventually, Rey's daily torture actually started to turn him on. He'd pop a boner when she flipped him the bird in chemistry class. His heart would start to flutter when she'd purposely bend over in a short skirt and then call him out for staring.

"Fucking perv!" she'd shout, disgusted, then wink before sauntering off with her crew.

There was something about the way she'd lock eyes with him and lick her lips while some dirtbag was whispering in her ear that made him instantly hard. How her laughter rang clearer above everyone else's, the sound traveling straight to his dick.

Loser!

Gross! You wish, Solo.

Are you lost? Fuck off, you nerd.

He'd merely smile in response. Because he knew what would happen when they got home.

The worse his daily torture was at school, the more sublime the pleasure would be at home. Coming on her tits each afternoon. Smacking her perfect ass while he buried himself to the hilt and called her a nasty slut between homework and dinner. The worse he dished it out, the wetter she got. He found himself washing his sheets more often than ever before.

The punches from Cal started not to hurt as much. The name calling from Finn rolled off of him like water off a duck's back. The wedgies from Hux barely registered.

Because every single night without fail, Rey came to his door or cornered him in the bathroom, looking for a piece of him. She was insatiable.

"You have the best dick in school. Everyone knows it but they won't admit it."

"But it's just for me, isn't it?"

"You like making me your little slut don't you. Fucking freak."

It was fucked up but he wasn't complaining.

They both knew the truth— no matter what happened—he owned her ass.

In spite of the antagonistic nature of their trysts, there were brief glimmers of hope—moments he felt like he could actually love her and that she might actually love him back.

Like they were like twisted soulmates.

He tried to imagine a world where they could be together, away from family, away from their strict adolescent hierarchy. Maybe in college. He could follow her to New York, no problem. There were plenty of good schools to choose from, but only one Rey.

He didn't want kids anyway, so who cared if they shared a few smidges of DNA?

But someone could still find out.

And as much as he'd love to humiliate her by baring their dirty little secret, it would mean that they'd be separated by their parents in an instant.

That he would lose her.

That he'd lose this amazing, fucked up thing they had.

But in spite of his best efforts, he lost her anyway.

Their parents encouraged them to attend an open house weekend for Rey's prospective college. Ben was charged with "keeping her out of trouble." They'd all flown out to New York as a family and then the kids were dropped off for a sleepover night on campus. Rey immediately found the in-crowd, of course, and to the shock of his life, that night, he found himself trailing behind her on the way to a frat party.

No one knew them. They were just Ben and Rey. And for the first time in years, he felt light and free.

After a few drinks, when they were the only two not dancing or doing some variety of upper or downer, he grabbed her hand and pulled her closer.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped, pulling her hand away.

"What do you *think* I'm doing?" He smiled flirtatiously. He had no reason to believe she wouldn't be into it. She'd crawled across his bedroom floor just last night.

“We can’t do that any more, Ben.”

It was like a punch to the gut. Was she breaking up with him? Was there even something between them that could even *be* broken up?

Of course there was. Only, he’d never let himself even consider it, apart from getting caught. Even if she’d never say it out loud, he could see in her eyes how she felt about him. How she fell apart beneath him. How he broke her into a thousand pieces and reassembled her into someone that might actually be able to love him back if she wasn’t so damned stubborn.

Was he really that fucking naive? Or was she really that fucking cruel?

“What the fuck, Rey? Why?”

She took a casual sip of her drink. Her cold bitch mode activated, just like it did when they were at school. His traitor dick twitched at the sight. But it wasn’t hot if it was *true* . No one was around to hear them, so there was a chance she might actually mean it.

“Because, Benjamin. I’m starting over. This is my chance to finally be my own person. Not a fucking cheerleader, or even a bully or whatever. I just want to start over and be normal. And you’re a big fucking part of that. You fucking bring out the worst in me.”

His heart started to pound. Was she actually *growing* as a person?

Was she growing *away* from him?

“I don’t have to,” he offered. “Maybe I want to start over too. Have you ever considered that I don’t actually enjoy being a human punching bag?”

She threw a hand up, exasperated.

“It’s too late for that. Don’t you understand? We’re two sticks of fucking dynamite together. We can’t do this anymore. Besides, don’t you think we’re outgrowing the whole kissing cousins thing? It’s not like we’re ever gonna get married. This is for the best and you know it. You need to move on too.”

“You don’t mean this, Rey. Any of it.” He pressed his lips together, as he watched her interest in this conversation fade. He was losing her. With each passing moment he felt increasingly desperate. But even more so, he was *pissed* .

“How could you just fucking dismiss me after all we’ve been through?”

“Oh, grow up Ben, it’s just sex.” She rolled her eyes. “Have some fucking dignity.”

He grabbed her wrist as soon as she placed her cup down on a nearby table. “Take it back.”

“Ow, you’re hurting me, let go.” She tried to pull away but he was stronger. His fingers dug in as he clung to his last shred of hope.

“Take it fucking back, Rey, or I swear to god.”

His heart pounded and his vision narrowed to a single point.

The bane of his existence.

The love of his fucking life.

"I'm gonna fuck you right here and now. Then you'll see."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Get on your knees and try me, slut."

She smirked. He marveled that the depths of her depravity never failed to exceed his.

"How's this your majesty?" she deadpanned, dropping to her knees in front of him. He wanted to wipe off that rude fucking smile with his dick.

His eyes scanned around the dark, crowded room. The music thumped rhythmically and the party lights flickered around the room. No one seemed to be paying them any mind. Just two lowly incoming freshmen, a big dork and a cute girl. Nothing to see here.

He grasped a handful of her hair and yanked her head back as he reached for the button on his jeans.

"Ben! Ow. You're scaring me!"

He paused for a second, studying her with sudden worry.

Her face quickly broke into a grin.

That was all it took for him to pull his cock out and promptly shove it past her smug little lips.

He blocked out all sight and sound except for her pinkening cheeks and teary eyes as she choked him down.

"That's it. That's where you fucking belong," he sneered. "On your knees sucking my cock. You don't even care who sees, do you?"

She flicked her tongue across his head and into the little hole. She knew exactly how to make his knees weak. It was never clear who was really in control when they were in their fucked up little world together.

He grabbed her shoulders and helped her stand up, backing her up to a nearby pool table. Kissing her with all the passion and fury he could muster, he lifted her ass up onto the edge of the table and thrust his hands under her too-short denim skirt. Rucking it up to her stomach, he wrapped her legs around his waist and tore the gusset of her panties to the side.

"Is this what you wanna give up, huh?" he grunted, sucking a bruise into the delicate skin on the side of her throat.

"You're a fucking animal," she responded raggedly, digging her heels into his lower back as he pushed roughly inside of her.

It was a thrill to take her out in the open like this, in a roomful of oblivious strangers. For one shining moment, he wasn't her shameful secret. Anyone could see that she belonged to him.

He thrust in deeply, grasping her face in his hands as she scrambled to hold onto his neck.

“Ben, fuck! We-we shouldn’t do this,” she gasped as a crowd started to form around them. She tried pushing him away.

“You fucking love this, you whore,” he insisted, grabbing her skirt like a harness and ramming into her as she fell back onto her elbows. He loved watching her tits bounce in her tight halter top. “You’re so fucking wet.”

For the first time ever, he thought, as he looked from her pussy up to her increasingly scared face, that he might have actually shaken her up for once. The Queen Bitch of Johnson High was actually cowed. Her head whipped back and forth as people whispered and giggled around them.

“I fucking hate you!” she cried out. It only made him harder. Her pussy clenched and squeezed him as she crimped her eyes shut and shuddered. He could still make her come, even if she despised him. That had never been a question.

“Good! Do whatever you want,” he shouted back, wrapping his arm around her back and pulling her tight against him. ‘I hope I never fuckin’ see you again,’ he lied, his breath hot in her ear. She pushed at him futilely, and he could hear a sob emerge from her throat. “Take something to fucking remember me by,” he grunted, exploding inside of her, only for his pleasure to become quickly tainted by a tinge of regret and shame.

He paused, wondering if he’d truly fucked up. Finally crossed a line. She certainly deserved his wrath, but there was something less enjoyable about her not being in on their little game anymore.

Slowly slipping out, he caught his breath. She lowered her feet to the floor, pulling her skirt back down. As he backed away, he tucked himself back in his pants and took what would be his one last true look at her.

Bane of my existence.

Love of my fucking life.

The looky-loos around them resumed their drinking and ignoring. Thankfully, no one had pulled out a smartphone.

Chagrinned, she finished fixing her skirt and raised her chin to glare up at him.

“Don’t worry,” she bit out as she started to march past him, eyes reddened and rimmed with tears.

“You won’t.”

Chapter 4

Rey sighed, swirling another forkful of ramen noodles as she added another unpayable bill to the stack. She only had one week to come up with the rest of her rent, before her landlord Plutt kicked her out on the street.

It wasn't for lack of trying, but she'd barely scraped by to earn a bachelor's degree, and none of her internships had magically transformed into full time employment. It had been nothing but a broken strand of temp jobs, with a few extended contracts here and there.

She'd never been good at waiting on tables. Customers found her too rude and always narked on her to the manager. And she'd been caught spitting in food more times than she could count.

Fuckers.

Her mom wasn't interested in floating her anymore, finally remarried and content back in California. Rey could have moved back when her mother had been feeling more generous, but her pride had gotten the best of her.

Maybe she was just like her father. Unable to give a shit. Unable to love.

Unable to *be* loved.

The last thing she wanted was to go home with her tail between her legs. Live in the Solo's goddamn pool house again.

She wondered what her cousin was up to these days.

She'd never been able to forget the look on his face after what he'd done to her on that pool table.

It was the first time she'd ever been afraid of him. When she knew that she'd finally broken him.

She'd been right, after all—ending things. They were like two sticks of dynamite, just narrowly escaping a spark.

Dating hadn't come easy to her ever since. Apparently most guys didn't like being used and treated like crap. Sounded like a *them* problem.

Maybe she'd find someone as fucked up as her some day. Someone that called her on her shit and gave as good as they got.

Someone she wasn't related to.

Her other friends hadn't had much luck in love either. Rose had already divorced Armie after an affair with Finn. Needless to say, she and Finn were headed towards court as well after she found out he'd cheated on her with Poe. Kaydel had an oops baby right after graduation and was still waiting tables at the local diner where they used to reign supreme

after football games. Jannah had moved to New York to work in publishing, but they'd lost touch.

The only ray of light in her otherwise dark existence was that she'd finally landed a job interview at First Order Tech, a startup that had just been invested in by a major venture capital firm and relocated to the east coast from Silicon Valley. They were hiring like crazy, and she actually might have a chance of being hired on as an engineer.

Finally, she could put her dusty bachelor's degree to good use and maybe even carve out an actual career after struggling to keep job after job.

It wasn't that she wasn't smart, and capable, she had just happened to graduate right when the job market had imploded. She'd taken on a string of random contract work and fallen behind in her technical skills, until no firm or agency was willing to take a chance on her. She also had a reputation for being a bit of a bitch, not that she could help it. It wasn't her fault people were stupid and uncooperative.

But Rey felt confident this time around. Not only that, she was tired of settling, and ready to put her big girl pants on to finally make something of herself.

This was her year.

For her first interview, she nervously cobbled together some hand me down business basics from Beacons Closet and steamed them until they smelled less like mothballs. Itchy and awkward, she stumbled in her secondhand heels to the massive skyscraper downtown where First Order Tech was headquartered.

The elevator deposited her on the second highest floor, into a sleek black and white marble lobby with modern leather furniture, perfectly manicured plants, and ambient lighting.

The woman behind the desk ignored her while she finished typing an email. Without looking up, she finally addressed Rey.

"Name?"

"Uh, Rey Niima?"

Still not looking at her. Rey tried her best not to roll her eyes. She'd learned the hard way that the front end admins were the gatekeepers. Piss them off and you were basically doomed.

"And you have an appointment?"

"Yes, m'a-uh, yes," she stammered, worried she'd offend the woman by assuming her age.

The woman raised an eyebrow but continued typing and finally made eye contact.

"Have a seat, Ms. Holdo will be with you shortly."

Rey sat primly on the edge of a low-slung mid-century modern couch clad in black leather, hitched her tote further up on her shoulder and folded her sweaty palms over her knees.

Mentally, she rehearsed her strengths and weaknesses, rephrasing her propensity to be perceived as "difficult" as "willing to ask the tough questions."

It wasn't that she didn't care about other people, or didn't want to cooperate necessarily. Perhaps her dad leaving her at a tender age had had more of an impact than she'd ever cared to realize until recently. She didn't trust easily, and she never wanted to get too comfortable or attached. Too much had been swept away from her already. Maybe that's why it didn't hurt so much every time she got fired. She could always convince herself it was their loss.

For the most part.

This felt different, though. Like maybe she might actually care. Maybe.

Looking around the posh interior of the lobby, she felt an energy thrumming. A dark undercurrent of hunger and productivity that vibrated through the air. People in dark suits rushed by in hushed conversation. They were *accomplishing* things here. Everyone was useful, everyone was engaged.

For once, she might actually take something seriously. A pit formed in her stomach. Caring was always a risk. But this felt like it might actually be worth it.

"Rey Niima?"

It was the receptionist, standing now, beckoning for her to go through the double doors that led to the rest of the office.

"Yes?" she stood, adjusting her shoddy black leather tote before smoothing her skirt down.

"Come with me, please," the woman requested in a bored tone, opening the door and gesturing for Rey to follow.

Rey shuffled behind her, trying to keep up with the woman's long, shapely legs as she marched confidently through the airy space.

There were glass offices all around the perimeter of the vast floor, with long rows of white desks in the center, decorated with sleek Mac monitors, mostly filled. They seemed like flexible seating arrangements, no personal artifacts cluttering the stations. In the corners were more of the same modern high-end furniture clusters where colleagues gathered in discussion with laptops resting on their knees.

White boards on casters were scattered throughout, with a few being scribbled on by a stern-faced man or woman mapping out flow charts and writing down tasks.

Scrum? Agile? Waterfall? She had so many questions, and was glad she'd written them down, along with her company-specific research.

The founder and CEO was young, with mysterious origins in Silicon Valley. He'd burst on the scene with an app that was quickly gobbled up by Google and then used the cash to fund a succession of startups. He was adept at selling when the time was right, and had every VC fighting for his attention. The mysterious Kylo Ren then sent shockwaves through the Valley when he packed it up and moved to New York City.

She was in awe of him, and a few Google searches revealed him to be unbelievably handsome, grouchy-looking, and secretive. No paparazzi photos of him with a random model on his arm, or disembarking from a Tesla. He seemed only to exist as an extension of the tech empire he'd built.

There was something familiar about him she couldn't quite place her finger on, but he was the least of her concern for the moment.

Amilyn Holdo was her person of interest for today, who would be her direct supervisor.

She stood outside her glass-walled office, wearing an immaculate suit, her perfect red pout smiling warmly.

"Thank you, Bazine," Amilyn dismissed the admin, who disappeared in an instant. "You must be Rey," she greeted, hand extended.

Rey fought the urge to wipe her palm on her skirt and accepted the handshake. Firm, but not too firm. Every movement of her body felt stressful, like it would be roundly scrutinized.

"Yes, nice to meet you Ms. Holdo," Rey smiled in return.

"Oh please, call me Amilyn. This is tech, not banking," she huffed a laugh as she led Rey inside her office. The door closed softly behind them as Amilyn gestured towards a cozy seating area opposite her desk. The desk was positioned in front of a wall of windows overlooking downtown Manhattan. Her eyes didn't know where to focus. Not one for touristy things, Rey couldn't remember ever being this high up since arriving to the city.

"Great view, huh?" Amilyn asked, as Rey shifted her focus back to the task at hand.

"Yeah, gorgeous," Rey smiled as she settled into a chair next to the couch.

Amilyn sat and kicked off her shoes, tucking her feet beneath her body and rested her elbow on the arm of the couch. Her casual ease was unnerving and reassuring at the same time, in stark contrast to their formal surroundings.

"So, Rey Niima. Tell me all about *you*."

Ah yes, the classic starter. Rey felt more at ease and went into her typical elevator pitch.

"And why do you want to work here, Rey?"

Rey pondered for a moment.

Because it costs money to live.

Because I need to feel like I have a purpose.

Because I'm nobody. I have nothing. And no one.

"I think I'm just really impressed with what you've built here. I would love to be part of it."

Out of the corner of Rey's eye, she saw a group of black suits march by Amilyn's office.

A familiar head of dark hair towered over the rest of the group by half a foot at least.

Kylo Ren.

Rey shivered, not expecting such a god to descend from the mountaintop and pass among the mere mortals.

And then he looked directly in her eyes.

She felt frozen for a moment, like a deer surprised by halogen lights on a dark country road.

Was it awe? Or fear? She shivered again either way.

As quickly as his eyes met hers, he looked away, and she was able to breathe again.

“That’s great to hear, Rey. I think I got everything I needed today. We’ll be in touch if we decide to move forward.”

Amilyn stood, still barefoot and shook Rey’s hand. As if Amilyn had pressed some secret button, Bazine appeared to whisk Rey away.

“Thank you so much,” Rey said absentmindedly.

She couldn’t get a read on Holdo, and she was worried she hadn’t said enough of the right things. She was sure there were tons of applicants, and it was an honor to get past the front door. Even if she didn’t get it, at least she knew her chances were improving.

Once home, Rey kicked off the heels and rubbed the swollen pads of her feet.

Her stomach growled, and she groaned at the prospect of another night of Ramen a la Rey. She was out of eggs, so it would just be a Kraft single and some frozen peas to make it a meal that night. Maybe she could also make something out of the nearly rotten avocado and saltines she had left in the cabinet.

She would give it a few days and call to follow up. In the meantime, she shucked off her secondhand blazer and stretched before grabbing her ancient laptop.

Before she could muster the strength to open Indeed.com yet again, she noticed a little red “1” on her email icon.

Dear Ms. Niima,

Congratulations, we would like to advance you to the next level of interviews for the position of Systems Engineer (mid-level).

Please confirm your availability for a phone interview with Mr. Ren on the following dates:

Rey’s eyes narrowed to a pinpoint focus and her heart began to pound.

Mr. Ren.

Perhaps she’d impressed Amilyn after all.

A phone interview was odd in the day of Zoom and all, but she took it as a huge compliment. He was surely a busy man, and perhaps just wanted to verify for himself that she could answer some basic questions.

She responded immediately and shut her laptop. This called for a celebration— *restaurant* ramen.

This was *definitely* her year.

Chapter 5

Workable Daily Digest: Systems Engineer (Mid-Level)

It had been a long time since he'd been so granularly involved in hiring, so Kylo usually ignored the e-mails listing all the incoming applicants for new positions. He trusted his senior managers, and rarely asked to screen candidates anymore, especially for middle management and below.

It was sheer kismet, then, when he thumbed open the email on his phone accidentally, and his eyes immediately landed on the first name in the list.

Rey Niima

His chest burned and he felt a sick chill go down his spine.

It wasn't a common name, so it *had* to be her.

Rey.

His Rey.

Had she actually studied computer engineering? After making fun of him when he'd dragged her to the state of the art computer lab on that last fateful college trip together?

Of course she'd try to best him at something she knew he was good at. To spite him.

Or maybe, some desperate, pathetic part of him imagined, it was to feel closer to him.

He huffed a quiet laugh in the clinical silence of his corner office.

Doubtful.

He clicked the link and opened the page to her applicant profile.

Her resume was a fucking joke. Nothing longer than a year, and all of her bullets were poorly written. Every line sounded almost defensive, like she'd been fighting for every scrap of an opportunity all along. Her salary requirements were laughably low.

He Googled her in spite of himself and found almost nothing. Her LinkedIn just listed her last few positions and she barely had any connections. There were a few Brooklyn addresses and possible phone numbers he didn't recognize that came up on those people finder sites. A Facebook profile that hadn't been updated in years.

She was a nobody.

Rey Niima was a *loser*.

And he'd won. He'd actually fucking won.

Suddenly, he remembered the day she left for college. He'd watched forlornly out his window as she'd thrown the last of her things in the trunk of her mother's car and drove off.

After the college tour weekend, she'd kept her distance, laying off of him at school and avoiding him at home.

Maybe he deserved the cold shoulder after what he'd done to her at the party, but that day, she didn't even say goodbye to him. Didn't cast one fucking glance in his direction.

He felt like a fucking ghost.

He'd never punched anything in his life up until that point, and he'd tried not to cry when he came downstairs to ask his mom to take him to the emergency room. Had to spackle the hole in his wall with his left hand and pay his mom back for the urgent care bill.

Despite being accepted to the same schools in New York, he took his free ride to Stanford instead and tried to forget about her.

He found solace in the gym as he watched his body cut previously unknown muscles while expanding the others. He grew out his hair and wished he hadn't waited so long to finally cover his stupid ears.

People noticed the changes, and started being casually nice to him at first, ultimately fawning over him, favoring him even. It was unfamiliar, but welcome for the most part. He still struggled to relate to other people his age and the stupid shit they cared about: Parties. Cars. Fast and Furious movies.

He often wondered if he would gravitate towards the mean bitchy brunettes forever or if he could finally accept the advances of the sweet girls who got all nervous around him. Despite their increased interest in him, his overall lack of interest in most girls served him well as he double majored in computer science and business and started coding his own apps. By junior year he'd made some modest advertising profits and started targeting bigger fish.

He changed his name publicly to avoid any association with his former life. The year after he graduated, Google bought his first big boy app (an app that predicted the route with the most green lights to shorten LA commutes) and he was the belle of the Valley from there on out.

He ran a few incubators and used the cascade of cash infusions to start a succession of small companies. Before he knew it, he was founding First Order Tech, an AI company that could be used by the military, healthcare, and the government, hell, even dating apps, to process large amounts of disparate data into discernable patterns of positive and negative sentiment.

His company quickly went from a scrappy startup to being acquired as a subsidiary of Empire Worldwide Solutions. He was at the helm for the foreseeable future, and for the first time in his life, he felt *comfortable*. The constant need to level up to the next big thing subsided, and he finally felt like he could rest on his laurels for a little while.

Occasionally, he would spite google his former tormentors and enjoy finding their divorce records, how haggard they looked surrounded by kids, driving minivans, and in general ending up exactly where he'd predicted they would.

Finally, he'd overcome his troubled past as a dorky punching bag. He was handsome, rich, and could do whatever the fuck he wanted (when he wasn't working nonstop).

He was living a nerd's fantasy life, the ultimate glow-up.

But when he went home to his beautifully furnished penthouse apartment, it was cold and empty. Devoid of anything personal— devoid of anyone else.

He was too well-known for dating apps and too proud to use a matchmaker. Through one of his coder friends from his incubator days, he was able to get an intro to a discreet dominatrix. She'd don a medium-length brown wig and tell him he was a piece of shit. Unfortunately, she really hadn't appreciated it when he tried to turn the tables on her without warning her first.

After a few failed scenes, in spite of the proper negotiations and newly acquired consent to "switch" as she'd called it, he'd given up and decided to try going to bars instead. He ventured all the way to Brooklyn in his car service where he was less likely to be recognized.

Girls there were more salt of the earth, less concerned about getting into Soho House and ordering bottle service, and slightly more interested in his taste in music and his politics than their Manhattan counterparts. But nothing ever escalated past a one-night stand, nor did he want it to.

How would he explain the fucked up intricacies of what got him hard?

And that was just sex. It was all that he was capable of, the only way he could feel in control. The only woman he'd ever loved had shattered him so completely, he couldn't imagine having someone else with that power over him ever again.

Deep inside, he continued to nurture that kernel of anger that had formed when Rey left him. The grudge made him feel validated. He could rest in his pain. Use it as an excuse. A shield.

A weapon .

Rey wasn't the best applicant in general, nor was she the most qualified based on the few others he'd skimmed. But they were hiring like crazy, and it wouldn't be a hardship to add one more FTE— at a lower salary of course.

Kylo lifted the receiver of his desk phone and dialed Amilyn's extension.

"Aren't you a millennial? Why don't you just Slack me?"

"Good morning to you too."

"What do you want, sweetie? I'm working on the RFP for Daiyu Pharm."

Amilyn always treated him like an annoying kid even though he was her boss's boss. He loved that about her.

"I want you to interview someone, as a favor."

"What, a niece? A girlfriend? I promise I won't tell anyone. I'm surprised you didn't pull the nepotism card sooner. Lucky for you I'm feeling generous today."

"I'll Slack you the link to her profile. It's just a family friend."

"Sure, hun. Want to grab lunch later?"

Knowing her, she'd probe for some weak spot to get a favor out of him later. But no one could know Rey's connection to him, at least for now.

"Can't, jam packed today."

He just had to see Rey, even if it was from across the office. Sure, he had her email and phone number now. He could just as easily do a more extensive google search or hire a PI.

But where was the fun in that?

"That's what you always say. One of these days I'll get you to buy me lunch, so help me," she giggled.

He could never tell if she wanted to pinch his cheeks or his ass.

"Of course, Amilyn. Thanks."

He hung up before she could questionably flirt with him again.

Now, all he had to do was wait.

Luckily for Kylo, he only had to wait a few days. She was as desperate as he'd hoped.

"I interviewed that girl today. She's sweet enough. A bit of a mess. A little concerned about her job jumping history. How important is she to you?"

"Thanks for your honesty, Amilyn," Kylo responded earnestly. "I'll take it from here."

Kylo signed onto Workable and moved Rey to the next stage.

Phone interview.

She'd probably be suspicious that the CEO was interviewing her next, but maybe it would feed her inflated ego instead. He just needed confirmation as to whether she recognized him.

And as much as he hated it, the most pathetic part of him just needed to hear her voice again. He called Baz to set it up.

"I'm not HR, have them do it."

"Bazine, you manage my calendar. I'm asking *you*."

"Ugh, fine. Morning or afternoon?"

"Just make it fit."

"Yes sir," his stubborn admin responded with a bit of snark to her tone.

It seemed he still hadn't kicked his bitchy brunette habit after all. And yes, he'd thought about fucking her early on, but knew it would be a bad idea if he had to see her every day. She already knew too much about him as it was — his doctor appointments, his coffee order.

Close enough for his comfort.

He hung up the phone and leaned back in his leather office chair, pinching the bridge of his nose and huffed a long sigh.

He hadn't just seen Rey— sitting there in Amilyn's office like a timid squirrel perched on a chair while Amilyn did her whole intimidation thing with the no shoes, lounging like a cat with a canary feather sticking out from her perfectly lacquered lips.

He'd *locked eyes* with her.

For a moment, he was frozen, walking in slow motion with his board members after a heated discussion about acquiring some smaller startups. He'd had Bazine schedule the meeting on this floor even though the conference room was smaller, and everyone was extra grumpy as a result.

But he could barely be bothered, because all he could think about was Rey. Here. In his building.

Maybe she'd come here because of him. Maybe she knew it was him, despite the name change. Did she research him and the company? Stalk him here?

Or was this just a lovely, serendipitous coincidence?

She looked as poor, pathetic, and pitiful as her resume had indicated. He could tell her clothes didn't fit very well and her hair was a bit of a mess, like she cut it herself.

It was a tiny thrill, seeing her so low. But in spite of all that—along with her slumped shoulders and an overall demeanor of having been defeated by life—she was still as beautiful as he remembered. And somehow, part of him still wanted her.

Even if it was mostly just to make her suffer.

He knew then that he had to have her here, working for him, subject to his whims and at his mercy. Even if she came here on purpose to fuck with him, or worse, didn't remember him at all, he had all the power now.

There was no way she wouldn't take whatever was offered to her. The shittiest salary he could legally offer. The team with the most HR complaints. The grunt work. She would be a glorified intern if he could help it.

And that was just work. His dick twitched at the thought of having her beneath him again, with all that had shifted between them.

His mind reeled with the possibilities of ways he could make her life a living hell. Embarrass her. Humiliate her.

Ruin her.

He swiveled around in his chair to view the skyline beneath him.

Somewhere in that city, Rey Niima was having a horrible go at life.

And he was about to make it so much worse.

Chapter 6

Rey was ready for The Call an hour before it was scheduled to take place. She nervously checked her hair and straightened her blazer. Even though Kylo wouldn't be able to see her, she wanted to *feel* professional.

Pacing back and forth across the tiny corner of her studio designated as a living room, she wrung her hands together and mentally rehearsed her elevator pitch.

I'm a fast learner. I'm always reading up on the latest tech trends. I plan to take continuing education on the side. I love taking notes.

Ugh.

It had to be a formality right? Why would the CEO waste his precious time on vetting a mid-level engineer candidate?

But the company was expanding rapidly. Perhaps it was just a random check-in to make sure they were bringing in good candidates. Scare off people who weren't serious.

They could certainly try. But Rey Niima didn't scare so easily.

Sure, she'd lost the *take no shit* bravura of her golden high school years, but she was even more hardened now. Instead of public shaming or sick burns, it came out as passive aggression, or coldness. Nothing like the outright terror she'd inflicted on her less popular classmates.

Her cousin.

Rey couldn't help wondering what Ben was doing now. Her mom had filled her in on his Ivy league admission and his subsequent success in tech, but she'd always changed the subject immediately to avoid learning more. She didn't need to hear how successful and happy he was now that she was out of his life. Or worse, that he'd found someone else.

Someone better.

She may have broken him, but she'd hoped in a way, she'd humbled him, made him stronger in a less dickish way. Part of the reason she'd been so hard on him to begin with was the way he walked through life like he was better than everyone else. He'd never even given her or her friends a chance, just assumed they were assholes. Which, to be fair, they *were*, but once you got to know them they were loyal and dependable.

And really fucking fun.

If only she'd found a way to be kinder to him, or at least let him in a little.

Maybe things would have turned out differently.

The sex had been their best (and only, if she was being honest) method of communication—but it was too volatile. They couldn't control it, or yield it, or contain it. The only choice was to end things before it consumed them both and destroyed everything around them. She

had to believe that, otherwise it just meant she'd run away and broken his heart for no good fucking reason.

Like father, like daughter.

But it didn't matter now. All of that was in the past. He was gone to her forever, and nothing would ever change that.

What was done was done.

Today was a new day, and the start of something really good. She could feel it in her bones. Even if she wasn't the best candidate, or the smartest, she was going to work hard as hell and prove herself. She'd find a way to avoid descending into utter misanthropy the minute someone mildly annoyed her.

Perhaps she had grown up a little. She was almost thirty, after all. She didn't feel the strong pull to punish everyone around her as much as she used to.

The one person who really deserved her wrath, her father, had never been an option.

But for once, she just wanted stability. To not have to fucking fight everyone all the time. It was exhausting.

Bzzzz.

Her phone vibrated on the stained, dinged up surface of her secondhand coffee table.

This is it .

Rey picked up her three-models-out-of-date phone and swallowed heavily as she read the unknown number. Taking a breath, she swiped her thumb across the screen.

"Hello?"

"Good morning. This is Kylo Ren from First Order Tech. Am I speaking to Rey Niima?"

His voice was deep and kinda sexy. Suddenly, she remembered that the man was, in fact, *hot* . She tried to focus on being professional, yet couldn't help but anxiously ramble.

"Yes, this is she, thank you for this opportunity, sir. I'm really honored you took the time out to call me. You're probably super busy and I just—"

He let out a soft, throaty chuckle. Was she amusing to him?

"It's no trouble. Let's just cut right to the chase," he insisted. "Tell me what you know about the company and why you want to work here."

She was taken aback by the directness of his question. Typically such an inquiry was a softball, a pat, boring question to assess a candidate's interest. But he almost sounded as if he was deeply invested in her response, and even more so, incredibly impatient to hear it.

"Ah, well, to start, I've worked for a lot of tech companies, as you can see by my resume. But yours seems different, I suppose. I really like the energy of it and uh—" her brain felt foggy, blank. She'd done the research, and had all this rehearsed and now she was just bombing.

Amateur hour.

“I’m really interested in your product, and the potential of it to change the world. I’d love to help contribute to what you’re building.”

“Hmm,” he responded, almost as if he were suspicious. He probably thought she was a moron.

“And what unique skills do you feel you bring to the table that would add value to the company?”

Scathing retorts?

Making interns cry?

Eating other people’s lunch to spite them but mostly because I can’t afford my own?

“Well, I’m a team player and I love to collaborate but I also am not afraid to ask the tough questions or provide constructive feedback.”

Another soft chuckle, as if he was trying to hide his amusement. How embarrassing.

“And how would you say you deal with constructive criticism, Ms. Niima?” he asked, a tone of mirth in his voice.

Was she a joke to him? Did he know more about her than he let on? Maybe he’d called her last employer, whom she’d flipped the bird at as she stomped out of the office. When she had nothing to lose, she remembered who the fuck she was and didn’t hold anything back.

But now, she had everything to lose. Her dignity was a small sacrifice.

“Well, I would say it’s definitely a growth area, but I’ve increased my self-awareness and am grateful for any opportunity to improve.”

“That’s good to hear,” he responded, seemingly pleased.

Maybe she had actually impressed him after all. She could imagine, based on her resume and job history, she wasn’t exactly a superstar candidate. Maybe he saw something in her that no one else did. Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes.

Please .

I really need this.

“Is there anything else you’d like me to know before we move forward with our decision, Rey?”

No Ms. Niima?

Maybe he was warming up to her. Her chest bloomed with a bright sensation of hope.

“Just that I’m really grateful for this opportunity. I can really see myself growing and succeeding in this role, and I just want to be a valuable member of your team. I’ve been looking for a place where I can truly thrive and grow and I feel hopeful that this is the one.”

Silence.

Her heart pounded as she waited for him to respond.

“I can’t confirm at the moment, but I’m considering bringing you in as part of our *Women in STEM* initiative. It’s true that you’re a bit underqualified, so we’d be bringing you in as a junior engineer for the time being, with the chance to be re-evaluated in six months.”

“Oh my god, thank you. I know I’m not perfect, nor would I ever claim to be, but I promise you I will work extremely hard if you decide to hire me. I won’t let you down, sir.”

This earned her a hearty chuckle. Making someone laugh was good, right? She couldn’t help but grin in response.

“That’s good to know. You’ll hear from human resources in the next few days.”

“Thank—”

He’d hung up before she could continue.

Rey placed her phone down on the table and exhaled. She’d just had a full on conversation with the CEO of First Order Tech. An elusive, handsome, mega-rich potential employer.

She may have completely bombed it, sounded like a pathetic idiot, and completely blown her chance. He could be blacklisting her and adding her to a *Do not call* list at this very moment.

Or, she might be on the path to a completely new life.

She’d managed to scrape together rent for the upcoming month and her utilities were still turned on for the time being, but her situation was about to downgrade to dire.

She mouthed a silent prayer and walked to the bedroom area of her studio to change into her work clothes. Another DoorDash shift on her bike, getting nearly run over by cabbies and cursed at by pedestrian tourists.

Just hold on.

Just hold on.

Chapter 7

Bleary eyed and sore from her shift the night before, Rey woke up and immediately picked up her phone to check her email. It was probably too soon for a decision to be made, but she couldn't help but check.

SUBJECT: Welcome to First Order Tech

Rey shot up out of bed, heart pounding as she clicked on the email.

Not only was she officially hired, but she would be starting the following Monday.

Letting out an inhuman shriek of joy, she jumped up and down and spiked her phone onto the bed.

“Yes! Yes!”

She collapsed on the mattress and covered her eyes with one hand as the tears started to spring forth.

Yes.

Yes.

After searching for hours for “capsule wardrobes” on Pinterest, and between one more trip to Goodwill and scouring her closet, she was able to cobble together a week's worth of outfits and shoes.

She'd “upgraded” her bag if you could call it that to something less scuffed and stained, that could hold her work laptop. Her plan was to bank extra hours at home to gain an advantage, learn the ropes a bit faster. Plus with a flexible workspace, she wouldn't have a desk to call her own anyway.

But what she did have was health insurance. A 401k.

A future.

Monday arrived faster than seemed possible, and the next thing she knew, she was soaring upwards to the eighty-seventh floor, hugging her tote to her shoulder and wiping away the drops of sweat that had accumulated at her temple with the back of her blazer's sleeve.

Bazine, the ruler of the front desk greeted her with an air of disinterest as she guided Rey to an open desk. Someone from the HelpDesk was already waiting to set up her machine. However, Amilyn's office was conspicuously empty.

“Hi, I'm Rey,” she held out her hand to the frazzled technician.

“Elrik,” he muttered, fiddling with her keyboard, staring open-mouthed at her screen as he typed.

“You should be all set. Just set up the Jumpcloud up on your phone and use the key to login on your machine, sound good?”

He spoke quickly, mentioning a few other things that escaped her capacity to comprehend, and left with a distracted nod.

She could at least figure out how to login right?

Settling into her chair, she rested her bag on the floor beside her and pulled out her phone to follow Elrik’s hasty instructions.

A mere twenty minutes later, she was able to login to her machine and check her five emails. So far, no one had so much as greeted her good morning.

Breakfast had been a hard boiled egg and an instant coffee before she ran out the door. She was already feeling queasy and in need of something to settle her stomach.

After checking her email and completing a few onboarding tasks from Human Resources, she ventured to the break room area on the other side of the open plan office.

It overlooked the other side of the city from where Amilyn’s office was situated, but the view was equally breathtaking. She squinted her eyes, wondering if she could see the general vicinity of her shitty apartment from here.

The landscape stretched out before her eyes and she could see almost all of the majestic bridges spanning the river between the east side and Brooklyn. She’d have to get used to being so high up.

She poured hot coffee from the sleek white Smeg machine’s carafe into a black paper cup.

“You must be the new girl,” a woman’s voice resonated behind her.

Rey turned around and subsequently strained her neck to see the face of a tall, icy blonde woman with a blunt short haircut wearing a gray designer suit cut to perfection. She was imposing, with blood red lipstick and held a tiny ceramic espresso cup in her perfectly manicured hand.

Rey wondered if she could have her own mug here too, or if that was reserved for senior people. She wondered if it would be possible to have some air of solidity here, of permanence, if that was possible in this economy.

Doing her best not to feel too intimidated, Rey thrust out her hand. “I’m Rey Niima, junior systems engineer.”

“I know,” the woman smirked. “I’m your trainer. Phasma Parnassos.”

She gave Rey a halfhearted, dead fish of a handshake, offering only her red lacquered fingertips as if she didn’t want to soil her hand. Maybe she was annoyed at having to train someone new.

It had never been Rey’s favorite activity either. It slowed her down, and she wasn’t nurturing or a natural-born teacher. It really should be possible to directly download information to someone’s brain. Patience always eluded her and she would make someone cry, or get scolded by her boss.

Get someone else to do it then. And of course, they did, and she would be out on the street again.

“Great,” Rey forced a smile. “Look, I know it’s not fun to train someone new, but I’m a fast learner and I’m really self sufficient. Just point me in the right direction and I’ll take it from there.”

As she spoke, she reached into the fridge and pulled out the sugary vanilla creamer, a rare luxury for her. She wondered whose job it was to stock so many varieties at the whims of the employees — there was oat, soy, and regular too.

Phasma laughed as Rey over poured until her coffee was far too light, even for her taste. “What are you a child?”

“Um, ah— I didn’t mean to—” she laughed nervously.

Rey clicked the creamer cap back into place and reached to open the fridge again.

Phasma huffed another amused laugh. “Let me know when you’re ready and meet me in conference A,” she nodded towards a conference room down the row from Amilyn’s, this one without a view.

Rey’s shoulders dropped, and she struggled to affix the lid to her cup properly resulting in coffee leaking down the sides and pooling on the counter.

Get it together, asshole.

After wiping up the counter with a paper towel and calming her shaky hands to seal the lid into place, she took a tentative sip, only to burn her tongue and drip coffee down the front of her thankfully patterned blouse.

“Fuck,” she muttered under her breath.

Her first day was going *great*.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur, with Phasma impatiently reviewing software access, SOPs, and org charts. Rey furiously wrote notes in a tattered old notebook until her free bank pen was close to running out.

Periodically, she’d peer around the office for signs of Kylo, but to no avail. She supposed it was a fluke, him passing through the office that day. Probably just a random meeting.

Lunch was spent alone in a nearby public garden, drinking more free office coffee and choking down an expired granola bar, due to the fact that she couldn’t afford an actual lunch. Luckily, that would soon change, and she could either bring her own food like some folks seemed to do, happily chatting in the clusters of couches and armchairs in the corner of the office or go out for fancy chopped salads or high-end deli sandwiches with her coworkers. That is, if she managed to make friends with any of them.

Phasma was an unlikely candidate, a few years Rey’s senior, clearly well-to-do and uninterested in her as both a coworker and a person. She made Rey feel like an awkward teenager, or a fresh out of college dumbass. She’d lost count of the exaggerated, impatient sighs, and not so subtle eye-rolls.

Despite being made to feel positively idiotic for most of the day and the rest of the week, Rey still managed to complete phase one of her training.

She'd been introduced to a few more co-workers along the way, some other junior and mid-level engineers. Dopheld Mitaka, Snap Wexley, Kazuda Xiono, Tallie Lintra.

They were cordial, but no one went out of their way to help her, and she could swear she heard them snickering behind her back. She'd see them stare at each other like it was an episode of *The Office* and she was the floundering idiot serving as their amusement for the day.

They often went out to lunch without her, not even being shy about asking each other to go out right in front of her, without so much a glance in her direction.

No matter. She didn't need friends. Nor could she afford to eat at Ahbonpan or whatever hoity-toity, overpriced sandwich place they couldn't stop talking about.

She needed this paycheck, these benefits, and a roof over her head. She could fake it til she made it, and then she'd leave all these jackasses in her dust.

For the first time in a long time, she actually felt confident that she might succeed.

By week two, their nonsense started to grate a bit.

"I think if we combine the patching with the server maintenance, we can reduce downtime and minimize disruption to our end users—"

"But when we move to AWS that won't even matter so—" Snap interrupted her yet again.

She was getting increasingly irritated by their antics. Usually by the end of the meeting Kaz or Tallie would suggest her same idea and get all the credit for it anyway.

Only a few days away from payday, she chose to spend her lunch in the bathroom, avoiding their annoying conversations about keto and CrossFit or whatever and hid in the end stall, playing Wordle on her phone.

"New girl isn't so bad, it's just that her outfits are so tragic. Like I'm about to take a scissor to those frayed-ass skirts," Tallie giggled. "And it looks like she got her bag off a dead body."

"Positively tragic," she overheard Phasma laugh in return as she uncapped her lipstick."

Rey fumed, squeezing her phone so tight, the cracked glass of her screen nearly cut into her hand.

She willed herself to keep that kernel of sadness down and replace it with anger.

In high school she would have roasted those bitches back until they were nothing but ashes.

She'd never been rich like Ben's family, but back when Rose and Jannah let her borrow their clothes and helped her shop the sales racks, she made do.

Sometimes, Leia would slip her cash before a school dance when her mom wasn't looking, or take her out for a girls day and buy her some back to school staples to supplement her

clearance finds.

She made do, and she always looked hot. Plus no one would dare say shit to her back then. It pained her to see how far she'd fallen.

Jannah.

Jannah was in the city. Maybe a real friend was just what she needed to remember who the hell she was.

Rey redownloaded Facebook, which she'd long offloaded to save space on her phone's miniscule storage. Now that she had an actual job and her life was back on track, she didn't feel ashamed to reach out to her much more successful friend.

She found Jannah's right away and shot her a message.

Hey bestie. I'm sorry I haven't reached out in forever. I'm working in the city now and I'd love to see how you're doing if you wanna meet up for coffee.

Even if she ignored her, she was already starting to feel better, remembering who she'd been — that someone like Jannah—good, kind person, who was also funny as hell—had once cared about her.

Suddenly, three dots appeared and Rey felt excited. It was a rush.

Hey, Rey. It's nice to hear from you. It'd be great to catch up — when are you free?

Rey grinned from ear to ear.

She didn't need friends at work. She had all she needed.

Almost.

She scheduled time to meet with Jannah the following week, after her first paycheck came in, and she'd actually be able to afford to eat, or even better, treat her friend to lunch.

She left the stall proudly, and faced herself in the mirror. Her clothes did look like shit, and she desperately needed a haircut.

But at the very least, she had a friend.

Rey met up with Jannah on a Wednesday at what she now knew was called "Au Bon Pain." Nearly thirty dollars of bread and soup later, they found a table.

"Rey, it's really good to see you after all this time. You look great."

Jannah's eyes were kind and Rey couldn't help but wonder if she was just being nice. She'd trimmed all the loose threads off of her clothes and re-hemmed a few of her skirts, hopefully taking away what little ammo her bitchy coworkers had chosen to use against her. She'd even trimmed her split ends and used some of her paycheck to upgrade her makeup at CVS. Maybe Jannah probably meant it.

"So do you!" Rey replied.

Jannah had on a killer green pantsuit. She was as lovely as ever, and seemed less shy than she had in high school. “So how are things in publishing?”

“Crazy as usual,” Jannah smiled, taking a sip of her ice tea as she smoothed her long, thick braid over her shoulder. “But in a good way. How about you? What are you up to these days?”

Rey swallowed her spoonful of butternut squash soup. It was actually pretty good. She’d save the bread for dinner and try to make a sandwich out of it somehow.

“I just started at First Order Tech as an engineer. I’ve bounced around a lot these past few years but I think I finally found a place I really wanna build my career.”

“That’s so fantastic, Rey. It doesn’t surprise me though, you were always gonna take the world by storm.”

Rey smiled shyly. Jannah knew her when she was at the top of her game. Maybe she could get back there. Hopefully soon, before she murdered her coworkers in cold blood.

“Thanks. You too — I’m glad to see you doing so well, not that I’m surprised either.”

“Oh well, you know,” Jannah laughed heartily, and smiled with faux humility.

They chatted amicably, and Rey hardly noticed the time pass.

Suddenly, she heard a buzzing at Jannah’s wrist, and her small watch face lit up with a notification.

“Oh shoot, I have a meeting, I gotta run. Let’s do this again soon?” Jannah asked hurriedly as she shouldered her bag and gathered her trash.

“I’d love that,” Rey grinned in response.

“Great, text me!”

Rey sipped her peach ice tea and reveled in achieving a successful friend date. She wondered if should have reached out sooner. Jannah wasn’t someone she’d really needed to try too hard with it seemed, and she had always been so kind. Maybe she could have had someone to lean on, and vice versa. She could have learned to not be such a bitch sooner. Maybe things would have been different.

Story of her life.

Rey’s phone buzzed on the table.

Phasma P.: Where are you?

“Shit!” Rey spat out. She’d totally lost track of time.

When she arrived at the office out of breath and hoping it was just Phasma being annoyed as usual, she slinked to a random station and pulled out her laptop.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

Rey swiveled around slowly to find Phasma standing behind her, arms crossed over her chest. She was especially intimidating from this vantage point.

“What’s up ladies?” Amilyn breezed by with an open laptop balanced on her forearm and a mug in her other hand.

Rey remembered she needed to bring in her own mug. Maybe it was time to stake her claim.

“Oh hi, Rey, you just missed the standup, but I can email you all the changes.” Amilyn took a hasty sip as she continued breezing past towards her office. “You’re probably gonna have to work late. Maybe don’t take a two hour lunch from now on, huh?”

Phasma smiled with smug satisfaction as Amilyn closed her office door behind her and settled at her desk.

“You fucked up, Rey. Amilyn was not impressed with your work at all. As a lesson, I want you to start over completely.”

“But—” Rey’s eyes welled up. She’d actually put a lot of effort into her supposedly shitty work, but she wouldn’t let this harpy see her cry.

“Just do it. And don’t leave the building for lunch again until you can manage your time like a grown up, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Rey replied, swiveling back to stare intently at her screen, hopefully sending a message.

Go away.

Fuck off.

She really wanted to *say fuck off* out loud, but remembered she liked having a paycheck and bit her tongue.

Seemingly satisfied that Rey had been berated enough, Phasma slinked away. Rey blinked away tears as she stared at her screen and reviewed the miles long list of changes from Amilyn. It did make sense to start over at this point.

No matter. She would stay until midnight if she had to.

Sure, she could probably complain to Amilyn that the undue stress of constantly being talked down to, ignored, and barely tolerated by her nasty colleagues who refused to offer even one iota of support may have led to her being a bit distracted, but that would just make her a tattle-tale.

Don’t let them win.

She knew she belonged here. She’d been vetted by the CEO himself, after all.

She wasn’t a nobody. She was the Queen Bitch of Johnson High, and she could certainly become the Queen Bitch at First Order Tech.

These assholes had no idea who they’re dealing with.

Chapter 8

It had been nearly two weeks since Kylo made the decision to hire Rey.

“Hire” was a loose sense of the word.

Onboarding her for his own personal amusement was more like it. So far, it had been worth every penny of her joke of a salary.

Poor little Rey. How far the mighty had fallen. From the girl who tortured him endlessly during his vulnerable teenage years, to someone on his payroll, completely at his mercy.

So far he’d taken delight in watching her muddle her way through her first few weeks of the job, by way of his strategically placed security cameras. There was almost nowhere to hide in the open-plan, flexible seating office, where every wall was made of glass.

He’d designed it that way on purpose. If someone wanted to fuck around on Facebook or whatever stupid app the kids were on these days, they could do it on their lunch break or in between crying sessions in the bathroom stalls.

There were no cameras there, of course, but he enjoyed watching Rey emerge into the hallway after hiding in there for a spell, eyes puffy, red and swollen from her tears.

Ever since she’d gotten reamed out by Phasma for taking too long of a break, he’d watched her eat a sad homemade lunch, standing up in the kitchenette. Watching her get her ass handed to her had been the most entertaining moment of his week. It’s not like long lunches were even a huge deal as long as people got their work done on deadline, but Phasma deserved an Oscar for that performance. Amilyn hadn’t even meant to pile-on, but her timing had been impeccable.

All he’d needed was to offer Phasma a few extra vacation days and a little extra on her quarterly bonus and she’d agreed to “not coddle the new employee” as Amilyn had so diplomatically said it on his behalf. She probably would have done it for free, the way she appeared to enjoy it so much.

Like him, Rey wasn’t constantly on her phone checking social media, and since arriving at First Order Tech, no one had complained that she wasn’t pulling her weight. It was fortunate then, that the team had found plenty of low-hanging fruit to chastise her with, like her lack of experience, her shoddy wardrobe, or her general lack of confidence.

During group stand-up meetings in the conference room, he watched gleefully as she was interrupted, undermined, and snickered at by her peers. Once he was done with this little exercise, it would probably be wise to filter them all through Human Resources, but for now they were doing exactly what he needed them to: make Rey’s life a living hell.

After the showdown with Phasma, Rey started staying late each night to rework her code, double, then triple check it. Without even thinking, he stayed late along with her, watching her hunch over her keyboard for long periods, and then suddenly perk up, yawn, and do little

cat-like stretches. Over the course of a few hours she'd managed to shed her jacket and kick off her shoes, and her only breaks were to refill coffee and run to the bathroom.

He ordered his own dinner while she went hungry and pulled the bottle of Bulleit Bourbon from his desk drawer to pour himself half a glass.

As the minutes ticked by, he watched her pull her hair into a ponytail and stretch out her chest with her arms over her head, her delicate breasts bouncing slightly in her blouse. In spite of his raw feelings about her, his traitor cock twitched in his wool slacks.

Adjusting his package didn't help, nor did repositioning himself in his chair as he took another sip of whiskey. When she folded one knee up against her chest, revealing a tiny sliver of white panty, he couldn't take it anymore. Confident they were the only ones remaining in the office, and knowing the janitorial staff had long finished their evening, he unbuckled his belt and pulled his cock out without hesitation.

She swiveled her chair back and forth and then spun herself around while seemingly reflecting upon a particularly troublesome line of code. Her skirt fluttered around her hips, revealing more of her creamy thighs, uncovered by tights in spite of the recently cooler weather.

"Fuck," he muttered as he pulled on his shaft, gripping it tighter and tighter as the impending orgasm bloomed in his core.

Thighs. Bare feet. Biting that fucking lip. Fuck.

His memories and sordid, unchecked imagination could fill in the blanks from there.

He could march down there and tell her right now who he was. It wouldn't be that hard to pull her into a deep kiss and then bend her over that shitty desk and pound his cock into her pussy over and over. He knew what she could take. What he could give her again and again.

Without even watching the screen any longer, he came quickly into his closed fist.

"Shit!" he sputtered, standing up and scanning the room for tissues, landing on the shitty 1-ply Kleenex provided by the building management service. He made a mental note to stock up on wet wipes going forward, if this shit continued.

Even after he made himself decent again, he settled back in his chair. She was still in deep concentration, and he still couldn't take his eyes off of her.

No. Fuck. Don't let her do this to you, man.

Exhausted and guilty from his shameful masturbation session, he was startled when she suddenly snapped her laptop shut and stood up. When he checked the time in the upper right corner of his screen, he couldn't believe he'd spent so long watching her.

In spite of his very much warranted anger, he still had to admit that she was as beautiful as ever. Even hate required some level of interest, he supposed. He was only human.

Sometime in the last week or so she'd trimmed her hair and gotten some new clothes, and seemed to be standing a little taller. A small smile formed at the corner of her lips as she slipped her ballet flats back on and donned her jacket.

She seemed satisfied with herself.

Although her struggles had been entertaining to watch, it wasn't satisfying enough for *him*. Nor, to his increasing disappointment, did any of his attempts to crush her soul seem to be working.

He went home feeling defeated, and unable to shake the real and imagined images of her from his mind, resorting to taking a Zzzquil to force his ceaseless train of thoughts to finally end and allow him to sleep.

Rey continued working late for the rest of the week, and began speaking up more in meetings, even talking over her colleagues and carrying her head a little higher as she marched around the office with purpose.

Like she belonged or something.

Not so fast, Rey.

Amilyn was going so far as to praise her in front of the others, and even gave her a more challenging project. Phasma barely seemed to get a dig in now, before Rey shot her an icy glare and returned to her screen, effectively silencing his strongest soldier.

He felt increasingly restless, laying in bed each night unable to fall asleep, wondering what it would take to finally take her down. When would he feel content that justice had been served? When Phasma snapped and fired her in front of everyone? When she broke down crying and ran out of the office never to return? Something worse, and more sinister, perhaps? Even beginning to imagine what that might be made him feel like he'd immediately lost the moral high ground in this invisible war.

As much as the thought of her suffering beyond petty workplace drama had appealed to him to some extent, it still didn't seem sufficient in holding her accountable to her many crimes.

She'd humiliated him.

She'd used him.

She'd broken his fucking *heart*.

All of this felt so hollow and empty in spite of his worst intentions. None of his employees had ever experienced the real Rey. They didn't know who she truly was, or what she was capable of. They were just being mean to a sad entry-level worker with a shitty wardrobe. An easy target for the right kind of corporate asshole.

And now he feared she was getting brave enough to become her old self.

It was time to escalate his strategy, but how? And how far down this dark path would he continue before it made him someone worse than her?

If anything, she had all the power, drawing him to his laptop screen again and again, distracting him, stealing his sleep and his peace.

This simply could not stand.

He could just fire her now, have security escort her out as soon as she arrived in the morning. Make it really embarrassing for her. Even if he gave up on this game tonight, he would still have won.

Maybe it made him weak, not being able to give it up so easily. For wanting more. For needing more time with her.

So, he continued to do nothing. That is, until one late night, as she rose to leave, he felt compelled to follow her out the door.

It was ten o'clock, and she seemed to be ordering an Uber on her phone as she approached the elevator. He had to rush to time it right, for his car service to follow straight behind her, his heart pounding in his chest as she nearly turned out of sight.

You fucking loser. She's got you chasing her. Just like always.

But he stayed the course.

Her cab led them both across the Williamsburg bridge, and deep into Bushwick, to a third floor walkup in a rundown building with bars on all the windows, tiny silhouettes of rats scurrying along the foundation, and trash strewn all over the sidewalk. He urged his driver to park a few doors down across the street so he could observe her.

It was a shithole, and he couldn't help but smile. A small victory, however unsurprising.

This could be enough, he reasoned. Assuming the rent on this dump was still astronomical, even for someone with a full time job, he could snap his fingers and consign her back to poverty as early as next week. He could make sure she knew it was him.

She would know that he not only gave her hope of a better life, but he also took it away.

So why couldn't he?

As a small window on the top floor illuminated, he peered up, the blur of a woman's shadow dancing across the window shade.

She was so close, yet so far.

She was up there, oblivious to him and his continued pain—his open wound, his lack of closure.

Maybe he would feel better if he could see her up close just once. If he could verify for himself the years of misery etched on her face, beyond the grainy security image he held in his mind's eye, and the girl he remembered from so long ago.

She would see him too. Know who he was now.

And then she'd see that she'd lost.

Maybe then—then he'd feel like this thing between them could finally end. But this time it would be on *his* terms.

He could finally remove this albatross that kept itself weighted around his neck, keeping him tethered to her, and denying him his freedom.

Rey's bedroom light shut off, and he was left alone in the darkness of his chauffeured car, raindrops starting to beat a staccato rhythm on the roof and trickle down the windows.

Without thinking, he pulled out his phone and shot off an email to Bazine, asking her to schedule a work happy hour but to only invite him and Rey.

Okay, weirdo.

Baz replied in her typical rude fashion, but at least she never questioned him, and didn't delay in responding to him, even at this late hour.

His heart fluttered in his chest when he got the meeting invite for two.

This Friday, he'd come face to face with his past, and end her hold on him for good.

He'd bring her so high, and then drop her just as quickly, relishing her descent.

He couldn't wait to see the look on her face when she realized all of it.

That he'd won. That she'd lost.

That it was finally over.

He was older, wiser, and stronger now, and he had nothing to lose, except this interminable burden.

Time to meet your match, *cousin*.

Chapter 9

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, Rey's phone buzzed on her nightstand.

She reached for the device, groggy with impending slumber and fumbled to swipe the screen to unlock it.

Instantly regretting her decision to check, she saw that she had a new work email: a calendar invite from the office admin, Bazine.

"First Order Happy Hour — Kanata's Bar and Lounge — Friday at 8:00 PM"

She was the only name on the invite, probably a blind copy or something.

Rey sighed deeply. The last thing she wanted was to spend *more* time with her asshole colleagues, but then she realized it might be a great opportunity to put all these motherfuckers in their places.

And that place, for each and every one of them, was beneath her.

It had taken her a while, but her growing confidence and success at work had been a huge boon to her well being—and her ego.

She hit the accept button with purpose and dropped her phone back on her bedside table. Her mind drifted to the dress rack at the thrift store. She'd buy something killer to wear with her black blazer and bring a pair of heels to change into. Then she'd walk over to that fancy-ass bar with her head held high. Her first order of business would be to order an overpriced drink and glare disapprovingly over the rim of her glass as she took a sip.

Perhaps she'd find some fun things to backhand compliment her coworkers on, like how they "didn't look as tired as usual," or how nice they looked "in this light."

She smirked at the thought and couldn't wait to watch them squirm. Maybe she'd even flirt with the bartender or find a cute rich guy to take her home. Things were looking up already.

It was about time she started living her best goddamn life again.

Happy Hour indeed, motherfuckers.

The rest of the week passed by in a blur, as Rey continued to garner praise for the increasing quality of her work, along with angry glares from the rest of her team.

She smiled and nodded her way through meetings, getting increasingly bored of one-upping her loud mouth teammates, and simply carrying on with her work and minding her business. It seemed to drive them insane.

Tallie even pretended to trip and nearly spilled coffee on Rey's new thrifted silk dress, but she ducked out of the way just in time, and Tallie spilled it on her own pants instead.

“Somebody’s clumsy today!” Rey declared in a faux-saccharine voice as Tallie slinked away, rolling her eyes.

When it finally came time for Friday’s Happy Hour event, most of her coworkers had already gone home for the day. She’d assumed everyone would just linger after business hours and walk over as a group, but maybe they’d felt embarrassed by their sad khakis and cardigans and had gone home to get on her level, sartorially speaking. Tallie had tried and failed to clean the spot on her slacks, and it had only spread. It had been the highlight of Rey’s day watching her sulk.

With the office to herself as usual, Rey happily pecked away at her keyboard and cleared her Jira queue until seven forty-five on the dot.

This still gave her time to freshen her makeup in the bathroom and make the short trip around the block to the bar a few minutes fashionably late. She didn’t want to seem eager, like she had no other plans or anything. Even if that was true. If anything this dumb teambuilder reminded her it was time to get a social life outside of work, now that she’d redeemed herself for her long lunch snafu. She made a mental note to see if Jannah wanted to hang out that weekend.

Compared to the last few years, she’d never felt more like her old self than she did now. Her bills were paid, her savings account was growing, and she felt like she was actually doing what she was meant to do. It seemed almost too good to be true, but then she remembered that she’d earned her place here.

That she belonged.

Arriving at eight-ten on the dot, she waltzed into the bar, back straight and stride long as the bouncer held the door open for her.

“Ma’am,” he smiled at her and nodded approvingly, giving her elevator eyes as she smiled back. Already off to a good start.

Her eyes immediately scanned the room, and it was relatively quiet except for a few small groups of people chatting and the soft jazz music playing over the speakers. There were lots of low tables lit by votive candles, and a few businessmen with loosened ties were gathered in one corner, the table already laden with beer bottles.

As she neared the bar, she recognized only one person, however.

Kylo Ren.

Immediately, she began to feel nervous. Why was the CEO the only one here? Did people at his level usually come to this sort of thing?

But even in side profile, he was more handsome than even the various photos she’d found on Google and the one quick glance she’d garnered during her first onsite interview. It was a shame he was her employer, because he was exactly her type.

He looked expensive, aloof, and unapproachable, or at least she had no desire to approach him. She felt a frisson of anxiety as she approached the bar, debating just turning around and bolting out of there before he saw her.

It wasn't too late to bail, she reasoned. Maybe this was a corny HR thing to improve "company culture" or whatever, but no one actually bought into it. No one would miss her, that was for sure, especially not the CEO. Besides, was she really gonna just hang out with him alone? She laughed to herself and turned on her heel to leave.

"Rey!"

His deep voice startled her and she froze in her tracks, slowly turning around to face him with a sheepish smile.

Fuck.

Kylo waved her over with his free hand, the other occupied by a highball glass filled with clear amber liquid. His long fingers curled over his cocktail, nearly concealing the entirety of it from view.

"Um, hi!" she replied, her voice high in pitch as she shouldered her purse and completed the journey over to him with some reluctance.

"Have a seat," he said matter of factly, nodding at the unoccupied stool beside him before swiveling in his stool to face the bar again.

"Thanks," she said softly, hanging her purse on the back of the chair and trying to mount the high seat as demurely as possible in her secondhand silk shift.

"What'll you have, Rey?"

It was odd, hearing her name on his lips, like they were friends or something. He'd surely looked at her LinkedIn profile before her interview, but they'd never interacted once since her arrival, nor had she seen him walking around the office.

"Vodka martini, wet and dirty with extra olives," she said just like she'd mentally rehearsed twenty times on the way over, with the hopes of sounding like someone who ordered double digit priced drinks on the regular.

"Excellent choice," he replied with a hint of amusement in his voice and nodded at the bartender. Usually she couldn't get a bartender's attention to save her life. This one responded to Kylo's body language almost instantaneously and immediately started making her drink once he'd relayed her order.

A gold-embossed napkin was laid carefully before her, followed by a slender martini glass, a toothpick full of olives, and then a condensation-covered shaker was pouring her drink in front of her eyes. It was an understated, but very entertaining performance, the likes of which she had never been subjected to before.

"You seem really excited about that martini," Kylo commented, as if he'd been watching her.

She pivoted her body towards him slightly, gripping the edge of the bar to avoid spinning off her swiveling stool and smiled. "It's been a long week," she joked.

It truly had been. She was clocking a minimum of sixty hours per week now, but she'd never felt more alive. It felt good to be earning her paycheck, adding value, and feeling like she was actually moving up in her career.

She'd earned this fucking free drink, even if she had to pretend to play buddy-buddy with her boss's boss's boss to get it.

"Cheers," he said dryly, raising his half-empty whiskey.

"Cheers," she echoed, carefully lifting her glass in an effort to avoid spilling any of the precious spirits.

She took a tentative sip, letting the bitterness of the ice cold alcohol and the brine of the olives wash over her tongue and sting her throat.

Her stomach grumbled quietly at the intrusion, and she hoped the sound was muffled by the ambient jazz music. She imagined she'd be off and floating in no time, and looked forward to devouring her olives.

She lifted the skewer and tapped it lightly on the edge of her glass before pulling one off gently with her teeth.

Delicious.

Soon, she was scanning the bar for free nuts or some other small snack. No such luck.

"Is it good?" he asked, making her realize they'd been sitting in relative silence for some time. He'd seemed in no rush to make small talk until now.

He was looking at her intently, so much so that it made her shiver slightly. It was hard not to feel like they were somehow on a date, just the two of them in this romantic setting, with expensive drinks parked in front of them.

"It's perfect," she smiled. "How's yours? Have you been here long?"

"I got here just before you. Came straight from the office."

"Oh me too, I must have missed you on the way out," she replied excitedly, imagining them sharing an elevator, her trying not to stare at his gorgeous profile or incredible head of hair.

Phasma would *shit* if she saw the two of them walk in here together. The thought made her smirk.

"Something funny?" he asked.

"No, no. I just realized we seem to be the only ones coming tonight. Is this not a popular thing here?"

"No, I suppose not," he replied wistfully, concentrating on turning his glass on the bar with the tips of his fingers. "Maybe they're just fashionably late."

"Ah, yes, that makes sense. I'll make a note to be cool and come much later next time," she responded, garnering a soft chuckle from him.

"Do you want to find a more comfortable seat?" he asked suddenly, giving her another soul-stopping stare directly into her eyes before scanning the room. His gaze landed on a dark corner with a plush banquette and a low table.

It was hard not to believe he was flirting with her. Weren't work functions supposed to be somewhat uncomfortable? Comfort was the realm of friends and lovers. Not people you shared a fluorescent-lit hellscape with while you toiled away your prime years in the name of capitalism.

"Sure," she agreed in spite of herself, wondering if agreeing to relocate would make it harder to leave, like it reset the clock on the evening, somehow. At least it would give her a better vantage point to keep an eye on the door for anyone else who decided Happy Hour was worth wasting their Friday evening on.

She supposed it wasn't a waste for her, though. A free drink with an attractive, powerful man she could win the favor of, and perhaps even help her career as a result?

What did she have to lose, really?

Chapter 10

They were settled in, at a corner table, a width of one seat apart, and resumed sipping their drinks. Kylo folded one long leg over the other and leaned back casually on the couch. “So, how are you liking your job so far, Rey?”

She placed her glass down carefully and folded her hands over her knees, mindful of her posture, even though he seemed disproportionately at ease. He was the more powerful one here, she supposed. He probably didn’t get nervous around junior engineers, or anyone for that matter.

Feeling overly warm, and she wished she’d chosen a dress with sleeves. Would it be weird to take her blazer off in front of him now? With him sitting so close, and looking at her so much?

“You know,” she started, choosing selective honesty given who he was. “It’s definitely been a challenge, and I guess I expected that I’d have a bit of a learning curve. But I really am enjoying it though. Amilyn’s an amazing supervisor and I’m learning a ton. I can already see how much I’ve improved in such a short time.”

“Hmm,” he said nearly before she’d finished her sentence. He swirled his index finger around the lip of his glass before taking a sip, draining it once and for all.

“How about you—how’s, um. Your job?” she asked awkwardly. “I mean you’re the CEO so that’s probably a dumb question.”

“I learn something new every day,” he replied thoughtfully before placing his glass down. He leaned back again and crossed one arm over his chest and fidgeted with his chin with his free hand, swiping his index finger back and forth beneath his lower lip.

As the alcohol slowly crept through her veins, her dominant thought was that he was handsome.

Extremely handsome. The flickering candles and the deep bass of the jazz reverberating through the speakers did something to her.

The entire situation reeked of romance—or at the very least the potential for sex. She pinched the side of her thigh out of his view to remind herself to behave.

Act professional, dummy.

“I guess that makes two of us,” she laughed nervously, picking up her glass again to take another sip. She was nearly at the bottom, and it had gone down faster than she’d realized.

“And what do you think of First Order, in general? Anything surprise you?” He sat up, shifting his elbows to his knees, leaning slightly into the space that had separated them.

It surprises me that most of my team haven’t been fired for conduct already for starters.

He looked at her intently, as if this was yet another round of a job interview, and her answer meant more than the question implied on the surface. Only she couldn't imagine why he cared at all what she thought. Maybe he was just really passionate about hearing his employees' half baked opinions on things they only marginally understood. Maybe he found it entertaining.

"I mean, nothing really. I guess I'm surprised to be the only one at Happy Hour," she laughed awkwardly, taking one final sip as she pinched what was left of her olive skewer between her fingers. She dragged an olive off with her front teeth unabashedly before giving him a sly smile. "But it's not so bad."

Was *she* flirting now? Could she really be blamed?

He regarded her curiously, tilting his head to the side, as if studying a zoo animal's behavior for research.

Maybe she'd just embarrassed herself, let her guard down too much. She'd come prepared to fuck with her co-workers, not the man who held her career in his hands. But she just couldn't help herself.

"Is that so?" he finally responded. He seemed unsatisfied with her answer. Maybe she was too beneath him to be considered someone he'd flirt back with. Maybe he could see that she was just faking it til she made it.

But then in an instant, his hand was on her bare thigh right above her knee. It was dry, and warm, and so, so wide. His fingers might wrap all the way around and almost touch if he was so inclined to make it happen.

"How about this, Rey. Does this surprise you?"

Her heart nearly stopped as her eyes darted back up to his face, and back down again. She replaced the olive skewer in her glass and took a deep breath.

"Um, yes?"

He licked his lips and she wanted nothing more than to kiss them. Up close, he was so uniquely beautiful, all of his features oversized and yet perfectly proportional to each other. His large nose, his pillowy lips. His fine lines, freckles, and moles combined made a feast for the eyes. A single silver hair jutted out from his temple, accenting his lush, wavy mane of thick dark hair. He was *definitely* her type, and she tried not to think about who he reminded her of.

He was *nothing* like her cousin. As much as she was projecting her insecurity on the situation, at least he didn't act like he was better than everyone.

Fucking Ben.

Not-Ben's hand lingered on her bare skin, and she held his gaze for a few breaths before he slid his hand up further. He shifted his body on the bench, finally closing the space between them.

"Mr. Ren," she whispered.

She couldn't believe this was happening. This was bad. And also good at the same time. Everything was happening so fast. Her heart pounded in her chest and she took short, shallow breaths. The vodka flowing through her veins made her feel like she was in a wild dream. This couldn't be real.

His breath was hot as he leaned into her ear, his voice low and gravelly. "Do you like to do bad things, Rey?"

"I—"

"I think you do. I think you're a little whore who wants me to fingerfuck you right here." His fingers crept inward and upward, making her squirm. "Or would you prefer to blow me in my car? Because that could also be arranged."

"Sir," she responded, purely out of shock as she gripped the velvety banquette beneath her for balance. How could she even begin to answer that question? It was like he assumed the answer, like he was confident she'd say yes, or he wouldn't have gone so far off the deep end so fast.

Once again he reminded her of someone else she once knew. And not just his voice—his words, the intonation—the neediness. Something deep pulled in her core, lighting up a part of herself that had gone dormant for ages.

She'd be lying if it didn't instantly transport her to those moments of weakness, where she surrendered to her lust and longing for her nerdy, stuck-up cousin. Who, in spite of all of his flaws, and all of the things that made them so wrong for each other, had been the only person to ever truly make her feel *right*.

She hadn't met anyone since that made her feel that way—wanted, needed, and safe in their control while also dangling over the precipice of absolute annihilation.

And now she'd found it again and he just *had* to be her freaking CEO.

"Or do you want more than that? Greedy girl," he added, squeezing her thigh for emphasis. "Don't be shy. I know you aren't."

He seemed to know her pretty well, or otherwise he was just extremely confident in his game. Either way, it was fucking *working*.

His fingers breached the hem of her skirt and his breath was hot in her ear. It would be so easy to give in to him.

"What do you say, huh? Are you a cheap slut then, or do you just dress like one?"

With that, she came to her senses.

Reality snapped into focus as he criticized her in the one area of her life in which she still felt inferior. No amount of styling would hide her thrift store budget wardrobe, even if she'd fooled herself into thinking so. It occurred to her that she would never be on his level financially, and she was only starting to pull herself out of the pit she'd nearly fallen to the bottom of.

Even worse, judging by how forward he was being, he wasn't looking to woo her. He was probably getting off on slumming it with someone powerless like her. She wondered if she

was the first—if she’d even be the last—to succumb to his seedy charms.

Jerk.

Handsome, sexy jerk.

At least he’d made it easier to resist.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

“But you want to,” he insisted, backing off slightly. “I can see right through you, Rey.”

She’d never felt so seen. Not since—

“I-maybe. I don’t know. I should go. Thank you for the drink.”

She slithered away from him, almost forgetting her purse as she dashed toward the door on shaky legs. The doorman cleared the path for her, and it wasn’t until she was outside in the cool air that she finally sucked in a deep breath.

It was no big deal, really. She’d been through worse before. At her zenith, she would have eaten someone like him for breakfast and laughed about it with her friends, except for Ben, of course. But Kylo had just cut to the core of her—seen beyond the confident, self-assured image she’d tried so hard to project.

Maybe he wasn’t so different from Ben after all.

That had been the beginning of her downfall really, hadn’t it? Falling in love with him.

She’d spent years wondering if leaving him the way she did had made her stronger— or if it had made her even weaker than being *with* him ever had.

He had made her feel vulnerable. Needy. Like she was only half of a person without him. And no one in their lives had any fucking idea. She hated that she had to love him all alone in that dark vacuum, because when he wasn’t with her, she was simply left with nothing. She couldn’t even tell her friends.

But they were just like a match and gasoline. They would have had to explode their entire lives to be together, or even worse, they would have been torn apart by their families anyway.

Ever since she’d made that cold, hard—yet necessary—choice, it was like she’d lost herself, drifting along until she almost lost everything altogether.

And where was he now? She’d been too afraid to find out. Did he think of her and how she had to break him to save them both? Was he grateful to have been spared even worse?

Was he okay? If he wasn’t, she didn’t want to know.

In her heart of hearts she couldn’t help but miss him in that moment, beginning to wonder if she’d made the right choice after all, despite feeling so convicted about it for so long.

Damn it.

She thought she was doing better. That the Queen Bitch was back again.

But this wasn’t Queen shit. This was pathetic. Just when she was getting her life back on track she’d let her guard down. Let herself go too far with a rich asshole who probably

thought she was an easy score. He could fire her tomorrow and would probably laugh about it.

She felt kind of stupid, actually. He'd been so nice in the interview, with all his "Women in STEM" bullshit. If she had gone through with it and Phasma or any other of her tormentors at work found out they'd *never* let her live it down. Worse, the thought of losing Amilyn's respect was even harder to fathom. At least Amilyn had been kind.

Still processing what had just happened—what she had come so close to letting happen—she started putting distance between herself and the bar. It was nearly nine-thirty, and she snapped quickly back to sober as she thumbed her way to a Lyft pickup.

Afraid to wait in the lobby of the First Order Building lest she run into him again, she ducked into a CVS vestibule and hid in the corner to avoid activating the automatic doors over and over again.

Resting her head against the window and closing her eyes, she could still feel the heat of his hand on her thigh, like a brand.

Fuck me.

She felt slick cooling between her thighs and her heart rate had finally returned to normal, now that she was alone and safe.

Don't do this to yourself, Rey. Don't sabotage what you've worked so hard for.

Maybe she'd been too hard on herself. He was really fucking sexy, and she was only human. The important thing was that she hadn't gone through with it.

Not so fast, Kylo.

Chapter 11

Kylo slouched back against the velvet banquette as he watched Rey practically run out the door to escape him.

Now *this* was way more satisfying.

For some perverse reason, it thrilled him that she didn't seem to recognize him at all.

Or maybe she didn't want to.

Money and power looked good on him he'd learned, and he often used it to his advantage. Maybe her brain couldn't possibly reconcile this version of him with the one she was more than happy to dispose of without a second glance.

When he gave her chance after chance to recognize him—to *see* him, and she failed, he couldn't help but push harder and harder, and see how far he could really take things.

She looked so sweet, and innocent, a girl just trying to start over and live a good life. He could all but convince himself that her little act was genuine. But he knew the real Rey. And boy was it rewarding when she started to reveal herself to him.

Her nipples hardened at his touch, and she practically panted when he spewed filth in her ear. And the way she flirted with him, devouring those olives like she used to devour his cock. He'd had to shift in his seat to conceal his arousal and simply couldn't stop himself from reaching out and touching her.

It was just like old times.

Even if this was just the first round of battle, his victory was practically assured. It didn't surprise him that she was flustered and nervous and trying to resist his advances, him being her employer and all. She'd gotten some ethics over the past ten years, it seemed—like she was almost a normal person.

But he knew better.

As much of a turn on as it'd been to see her squirm, he still preferred her feisty: challenging him, daring him to take control. It wasn't enough to just kick her when she was down—she had to *want* him to do it.

You know I can take whatever I want, right? You may be the world's biggest bitch but I'm stronger than you. Maybe that'll finally shut you the fuck up?

You're too chicken shit. I'd like to see you try.

He just had to approach her the right way from now on. Maybe she was already so low, that reminding her of that was more of a turnoff. That's exactly when she'd snapped out of it, when he'd insulted her dress.

He imagined the possibilities, making her fall for him instead—actually wooing her. Maybe he could tempt her with gifts: new clothes, a designer purse, a phone. It would be a small

price to pay to carry her to the very top of the world, and then watch with glee as she fell into the abyss.

Here was his chance to have his cake and eat it too, he mused. The humiliation he could inflict on her would be delicious. Her teammates would simply love to rip Rey to shreds for walking into the office like a freshly fucked sugar baby every day. Phasma would see her coming from a mile away and probably do his dirty work for him.

But Rey wasn't into things like that as far as he knew.. And romance wasn't ever exactly their thing. He had always liked when she treated him like shit in public and became his little slut in private. As much as he hated being her dirty secret, it made him feel powerful just the same. That she belonged to him, and only him; that their time together was sacred.

Trying to push her at that fateful college party back then had been too much too soon. If he'd given it time, maybe she'd have come around to see that they belonged together, no matter the consequences. Or maybe she would have crushed him to dust no matter what.

She probably still could.

She did seem a little different now. Like she was trying to be a better person. But wouldn't it be fun to one-up her there too? Then she'd get to find out that she'd been beaten at her own game, and signed up for it willingly. He pictured the look on her face when she realized she was finally in love with *Ben Solo* and it broke her into a million pieces.

That's to assume she wouldn't somehow trick him into playing the fool again. He'd learned to never underestimate her, even as downtrodden as she'd become. Beyond her body's response he'd seen the glimmer of the old Rey, when she claimed those olives with her teeth.

Once a predator, always a predator.

He groaned at his constant swirl of obsessive thoughts about *her*.

You already fucking won, dude.

Why are you holding on?

His mind drifted to giving up and moving past all of this petty bullshit. He should fuck someone else to get her out of his system. Buy a boat. Go skydiving. Take a goddamn vacation and do all of the above. And some part of him thought he should actually call his mother for once, outside of a holiday obligation.

He'd carried this burden alone for so long, never daring to reveal his pain to anyone, ever. No one in their family had a *clue* what he'd suffered. Not the bullying he'd endured, not his heart being ripped to pieces by their precious Rey. He often wondered if his life would have turned out any different had he not harnessed his suffering and directed it towards rendering himself utterly untouchable. Instead of marinating on his utter aloneness, he simply chose to use it as fuel.

And it had worked, until she reappeared in his life like a fucking ghost to haunt him.

Fed up with his fruitless overanalyzing and strategizing, he was eager for sleep. He paid their tab and called up his car.

That night, he lay in his bed, still mentally running through his options to fight or flee. Before long, he found himself unable to stop from fucking his hand to the thought of what would have happened if she hadn't run out of that bar.

If she'd stayed. If she'd come home with him.

If she'd never left.

It felt dangerous, this obsession with her and what to do about her; his inability to decide between love and hate or a combination thereof. It was either going to vindicate him and set him free or drive him to madness.

Yet he couldn't stop.

He had to do *something*, and he had to keep going. He could actually win this battle once and for all, even if he was the only one fighting. But at what cost?

What the fuck am I gonna do?

The following Monday, he failed to pull himself away from the office at a decent hour. Instead, as the sun set, he remained glued to his chair, clicking from back and forth between his email and a never ending array of tabs waiting for his review and approval. Every so often he'd fail to resist checking the window containing the security feed. He'd minimized it multiple times, but had been unable to bring himself to close it out completely.

Once again, she was the last one in the office, save for him of course. But she didn't know that.

It was just them now, and he had a choice to make.

Let her go and move on. Fly halfway across the world and try to forget.

Or stay. Seduce her and ruin her—and maybe himself in the process.

Via the grainy security camera, he watched as Rey pulled her hair out of its tight ponytail and shook it loose, threading her fingers through her chestnut waves. He turned up the sound, and he could hear her pleased moans as she massaged her scalp.

His throat constricted, and his pulse started beating loudly in his ears. He felt overcome with an intense need to act.

She can't keep getting away with this.

He knew then that he wouldn't ever come up with a plan that would make enough sense. That none of this was logical, or something he could even pretend to control.

They were like two opposing electrical currents waiting to spark against each other and burn down everything around them. And he was tired of pretending there was anything he could do to stop it.

"Fuck it."

He locked his computer and grabbed his suit jacket and threw it on. As if driven by an invisible motor, he strode to the elevator in record time.

The doors opened into the open workspace, but she remained oblivious to the sound, typing away at her keyboard. She had one foot propped up on her chair, but this time wearing slacks.

Pity.

Crossing the room in a few long paces, he slowed down as he stalked closer and closer to her. She hummed softly, and for some twisted reason it made him harden.

He approached her quietly from behind and stood beside her, placing both of his hands next to her keyboard on the edge of her desk. She startled.

“What are you working on?” he asked nonchalantly, in spite of his heart fluttering wildly in his chest.

He felt reckless, crazed. He had no plan to speak of, which was probably very stupid, and yet here he was.

“Fuck! Shit! Sorry, you scared me,” she responded, flustered.

He’d never seen her like this, except for a glimpse when he’d failed at seducing her last week. It thrilled him to have the power to make her act like this. And yet he yearned for her to tell him to fuck off.

Or even better, to dare him to try something.

“My apologies,” he responded dryly, trying to contain his excitement. “I noticed there was still activity on this floor. The cleaning crew are usually done by now so I came down to check on things before I head out.”

“Sorry for the trouble. I was just uh, wrapping up actually. I didn’t realize it was so late.”

He backed away as she rose from her chair and shut her laptop.

“Can I walk you out?”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said shyly, packing up her bag before hoisting it over her shoulder.

Here we go.

Turning on the charm, he crossed his arms over his chest. “I insist. The safety of my employees is paramount. Do you have a ride home?”

She lifted her phone out of her bag and waved it. “Uber or Lyft whichever is cheaper-ah faster.”

“I’ll wait with you then,” he insisted, not giving her an inch of wiggle room.

I have all the time in the world, sweetheart.

“Uh, I guess. If you insist,” she responded suspiciously. Her slight annoyance fueled him.

There she is.

He followed closely behind her as she walked tentatively toward the elevator.

Imagining his eyes as pools of black, like a shark focused on his next meal, he waved her in as the elevator doors opened. "After you."

She nodded and smiled sheepishly, walking to the back and turning towards him as the doors shut behind his back. Still facing her, he waited a few beats before reaching over to the shiny silver panel to hit the red emergency stop button.

"Wha—" she started before he descended upon her, backing her against the mirrored wall.

Her bag dropped to the floor and he took the opportunity to grasp both her wrists and pin them over her head, wedging a knee between her thighs.

She gasped as he pressed his body into hers. "What the—"

"You walked out on me on Friday. That was quite rude of you, don't you think?"

"Sir, I—" Her breathing was labored as he stared into her eyes and demanded an answer with his own.

"Was it something I said? I thought we were having a good time, Rey."

She pressed her lips together and searched the space over his shoulder.

"No—" She hesitated. "It's just—" She blew out a breath as if choosing her words carefully, and then deciding to go for it. "Well, yeah. It was something you said, actually."

He loosened his grip, but only slightly.

Come back to me, Rey.

"Tell me. Was it when I called you a *whore*?"

He raised an eyebrow.

She paused before responding, brow furrowed. But it was written plain on her face.

"My dress. You made fun of it. I know you're rich and all, but you know how much money I make and I'm sorry if I don't dress as well as you, Mr. *CEO*, but you don't have to be so fucking rude about it."

His dick was about to burst the seam of his pants. He smiled, cocking his head. This was getting fun. He lowered his voice for good measure, keeping his tone steady and his words clear and clipped.

"Your *dress* was fine. I was talking about the *slut* wearing it. Does that clear things up for you?"

She bit her lip, her eyelids suddenly drooping with impending lust.

"Yeah, maybe," she replied softly. "A little."

He transferred both wrists into the grip of one hand and slid the other palm down one of her arms to rest it across her throat instead, fingers gently palpating the sides like a promise.

"So, are you going to apologize to me then?"

She huffed a haughty laugh. “For what?”

“For leaving so abruptly when we were having such a nice evening together.”

She scowled.

Just a little bit more, Rey. You can do it.

“I’m a very forgiving man, Rey.”

He squeezed the sides of her throat and she let out a little whimper, her body squirming against the wall that he had her pinned against, inadvertently rubbing her mound against his upper thigh.

“I’m not sorry,” she replied.

“Oh is that so?” he smirked.

Her eyes blazed with renewed defiance.

Now we’re talking.

“I really care about this job, *Mister Ren*. I’m not going to fuck you and sabotage everything I’ve worked so hard for.”

He loosened his grip on her wrists and throat slightly and chuckled.

“Oh is that so? Who said I want to fuck you?”

She looked slightly chastened and confused. It was very entertaining to see her gears turning in real time. It was just like he’d discovered so many years ago. She hadn’t expected to find an equal in him. And once she had, it was like she couldn’t live without him, no matter what she did or said, he knew it in his very core. And after all this time, he still craved it.

Come back to me.

“Then what the fuck are you doing?” she retorted, glaring up at him. “Is this a team builder, sir? If you’re gonna try to get pussy on the company dime at least be honest about it.”

His heart surged, a wave of adrenaline bursting through his veins.

He couldn’t help it. He kissed her.

There wasn’t enough air in the few seconds where she hesitated, and he felt it was game over, that he’d lost, and that he’d made a terrible mistake in a moment of intense weakness.

Then she kissed him back.

Now there was nothing stopping him from surrendering to this madness. It was like his body remembered hers, trailing his hands down her arms to cup both her breasts before wrapping them around her ribcage, pulling her body tight against him.

She still felt the same, tasted the same, smelled the same.

You’re still my Rey.

“Oh!” she exclaimed against his lips. “Kylo—”

I'm still Ben.

"Say it. Say you want me to fuck you," he urged, kissing her again and pinning her against the adjacent wall this time.

"I can't—"

"Beg me for it, Rey," he growled in her ear, laving kisses along her throat.

Her body clenched against him, as if the words had triggered something in her. If his body remembered hers, even if she tried to deny the reality in front of her, *her* body also knew *his*.

"Fuck—okay— *please* —"

That was all he needed to hear, as he reached up and pulled her blouse apart, sending buttons flying and eliciting a small, sexy whimper from her lips.

He pulled her bra cups down and encased a nipple between his lips greedily before kissing up her clavicle and the column of her throat.

"Here?" she panted as he roughly unbuttoned her pants and shoved them down to her knees until his foot could push them all the way to the floor

"Here," he insisted, roughly cupping her sex and finding her panties soaked through.

He wrenched her panties to the side, sliding a finger into her wet heat, finding her ready as ever to take him, because of course she was.

She always was.

For a moment, he almost forgot how much he had come to hate her these many years, the seething rage that had fueled him to this frenzied state and this total loss of control. To this overwhelming moment of nostalgic lust.

The only thing that was missing was for her to fucking realize who he was.

He flipped her back around, walking her forward until her cheek was flush with the mirror, and he could see the wildness in his own eyes over her shoulder. He gathered her wrists in each hand to place her palms flat on the reflective surface. Wrenching her panties down to her knees, he observed her slightly fuller ass was as perfect as he remembered. Fishing his cock out from his hastily unzipped fly, he braced one firm hand on her waist and used the other to slide his head through her dripping center.

"Oh god. I can't believe— *Fuck!*" she moaned as he pressed inside and reached for her shoulder with the same hand he'd used to line himself up with her entrance.

He pulled her back roughly, rapidly enveloping himself in her slick warmth, unable to contain his own groan of pleasure as it joined her high-pitched whines.

Like an animal, he fucked into her roughly, seizing what he'd yearned for since she came hurtling back into his life, claiming his prize for all of his suffering.

This is why he couldn't move on. This is what kept him tethered, trapped, needy and desperate.

He'd forgotten what it felt like to be this whole. That no amount of money, success, or power had filled the void she'd left when she broke them in two.

He hated her for making him this way—for how much he knew he'd needed her. That deep down, that he may never be able to let her go.

He fucked his longing, his sadness, and his rage into her all at once.

Her palms scrambled for purchase on the mirror as he rocked her slight frame. He slid his forearm across her chest and pulled her back against his body, so he could take it all in for himself. She was a sight to see, hair in disarray, breasts exposed, pussy on display.

He slid his hands up her torso, kneading at her hard, rosy nipples as he continued pounding his hips into hers, their eyes locked in the mirror.

Reaching around to knead sloppy circles into her clit, he nosed at her temple, peppering rough, needy kisses against her cheek.

Her jaw hung open in ecstasy, her eyes squeezed shut, and soon he drove her to a shuddering climax.

He closed his eyes against the sight of them where they both belonged, suddenly becoming nearly too much to bear. She still didn't seem to know who she was actually fucking, but at least he knew that some version of himself was deemed worthy of her now.

Before tears could come, he focused on how good it felt to be inside her. To pretend she wasn't the monster that had ripped his heart out of his very chest once upon a time.

Maybe now I'm enough for you.

"Fuck," he spat out, close to release. It was building to a searing pleasure, the likes of which he hadn't felt in years. Not since her. Never without her.

She had to know it was him. She *had* to. Why wouldn't she fucking say it?

He allowed himself to look at them together again. To take in her expression.

Maybe it was post-orgasmic clarity that had led her to this point. Her expression was pained, confused. She looked like she wanted to say something, but didn't know how.

"Tell me Rey. What do you see?"

"I— I don't—"

"Say it. Fucking say it."

"No-You can't be." Her voice cracked with impending tears, her eyes wildly scanning the sordid picture reflected before her with increasing desperation.

He grasped her throat again, splaying the fingers of his other hand wide across her abdomen.

Pressing his nose to her hair, his lips brushed her ear roughly with each thrust of his hips. "That's right. Say my name. My real fucking name."

A sob escaped her throat, and he nearly joined her. He didn't know whether to scream or cry. He kept fucking her, however slowly. He was so close.

"Rey. Please."

She shook her head, her lower lip trembling, her features crumpling with pained recognition at long last.

"Ben?"

Their eyes locked, he finally nodded. The dam broke, and she began sobbing, her fingers grasping desperately at the hands gripping her throat and abdomen.

"Fuck—" he sputtered again. A few short thrusts and he filled her with everything he had, savoring every burst of fleeting pleasure as it drained out of him and into her, leaving him empty and hollow.

Just like always.

"What the fuck? What is happening?" she whimpered.

He held on for a few heartbeats before she made an earnest attempt to squirm away. He relaxed his hold on her body, and let her settle on her own two feet. Just as quickly, she spun around and stood, shaking before him, covering her exposed body with her hands.

"Ben why. Why— I don't understand."

Tears ran down her reddened, confused face as she hastily adjusted her bra and shirt back into position and pulled her pants up again.

He felt completely disconnected from his mind and body, slowly putting himself away and catching his breath.

"Say something," she begged. "Ben."

He wasn't sure what he'd thought would happen, but then again he wasn't really thinking at all when he stalked her in here and hit that stop button. It was pure wishful thinking that she might've gone on the same soul-bending journey as him, seeing their bodies together like that again.

It had shocked him too — being inside of her. Feeling good because of *her*.

"What do you want me to say, Rey?"

Wiping her tears with the back of her hand, she started shivering and crossed her arms defensively over her body. "Why would you do this? How did this happen?"

Where should I start?

He put his hands on his hips, suddenly reliving that fateful college party. Where he'd gone to extreme lengths to hold onto her, only to lose her anyway. How was it possible he had grown so little in so much time? That he was still acting like a fucking child over old wounds that refused to heal no matter how much money he made or how successful he'd become?

This right here. *This* wasn't her fault.

She'd closed the book, and he'd reopened it for no good fucking reason other than he refused to get over himself. To get over her.

He deserved this feeling and whatever came next.

He met her eyes, and something in him snapped softly, like a dry twig. Like letting something dead finally die.

Without a word, he pressed the stop button again, reactivating the elevator. He pressed as many numbers as he could until the doors opened up, setting him free on a random floor. He couldn't get out of there fast enough.

"Ben, where are you going? What the FUCK?!"

He left the elevator without a word, letting it close behind him as she continued to shout his name in vain.

Chapter 12

Rey blinked back her tears as the elevator opened. Ben had pushed the buttons for every single button on the way down before leaving her. She darted out onto the next darkened floor and immediately pressed the up button on the panel.

Without thinking much about why, she felt an unavoidable compulsion to seek him out in his top floor corner office and scream at the top of her lungs. The words would come to her, she assumed, but she wasn't sure exactly what she hoped to accomplish.

All that mattered was her utter rage and betrayal, and her need to express it immediately.

And loudly.

His cum was still warm and sticky between her thighs as she waited impatiently for the next elevator to arrive. Shivering, she rubbed her arms for warmth against the imaginary chill.

Emotionally, she felt scooped out, hollow. Was this what it felt like when the gods pulled the rug of the universe out from underneath you? Like a freefall into oblivion with no up, down or sideways?

Just the black void, and endless nothingness. No one to catch you. No soft landing in sight.

Boarding a new car, she pressed eighty-eight and hoisted her bag up further on her shoulder, her heart thundering in her chest. Her ears rang as blood pounded through her temples, and her whole body shuddered with an anxious spasm.

Everything she thought she'd accomplished had all been a lie, and had fallen apart in one magnificent explosion of lust and hubris. An intricate prank that turned out to be orchestrated by the biggest regret of her life.

"Come on, come on," she urged the oblivious machinery, hammering on the *door close* button until it carried her skyward.

The doors opened and she stepped onto the top floor, which was only half-lit by the large fluorescent rectangles scattered across the ceiling. Her eyes scanned each corner until it landed on the one office without glass walls, the glow of a warm desk lamp spilling out along the edges of the door frame.

There you are, you motherfucker.

Marching towards his door with unhinged fury, she dropped her bag on a black leather couch perched outside like it was a principal's office or something. It made her feel even angrier, that he had so much authority here. She could very well be out of a job before the night was through.

Worth it.

Without knocking, she yanked the levered door handle downwards and burst into the private office.

Just as she was about to scream the first obscenity that came to mind, she saw him.

His dark hair cascaded down over splayed fingers holding his drooping head aloft. His elbows balanced on the desk, and his shoulders sloped as they bobbed up and down. And then, once he brain had processed the striking visual, the sound of deep, mournful sobs followed.

She'd done this to him—to some extent.

Rage rolled into mounting despair at the scene she'd managed to avoid ten years ago when she'd left without looking back. It felt like a gut punch, finally being forced to bear witness to the visceral aftermath of how much she'd hurt him. It was almost unbearable to take in.

Suddenly, she was eighteen years old again, and it was as if no time had passed. And in a way, it hadn't at all. On the surface they were adults, colleagues, people with rents and bills, who paid taxes and planned meals and managed laundry.

But they hadn't moved past that heart wrenching moment at all. That frat party where he pushed so hard she had no choice but to let them break. The day soon after when she'd left without a single word.

Just like back then, she felt caged, desperate to flee. But she needed answers first, no matter how much this deluge of unwanted emotions threatened to drown her.

His head hung low, and he sniffled.

"Ben—" she managed to eke out, her voice shaking before it broke into its own prelude to a sob. Tears flowed down her face, hot and almost painful, like her ducts couldn't process the sudden outpouring.

"I need you to say something," she sniffled back, fists balled at her sides, arms so taut they ached from the strain. It was like she was holding the universe back from collapsing on her. "Why? Tell me why."

He looked up at her, then, eyes red-rimmed and watery, nose and cheeks rosy and flushed. "I thought—"

She pressed her lips together to stop them from trembling and wiped her eyes with the back of her index finger.

"Thought what?"

"Just let me—" he started, trying to choose his words carefully. He swallowed and sat up in his chair. "I thought getting revenge on you would make me feel better. That you deserved to be punished for what you did. And then maybe I'd finally get over you."

So it really was that simple.

"Did you plan all of this? For how long? How much of my life since I last saw you was part of your fucking revenge plot?"

He huffed a defeated laugh.

"It's not fucking funny, Ben."

She shuddered to think of all that he might have done to keep her down. To lure her here. To dangle a life worth living in front of her only to snatch it away. To think she'd felt bad about what she'd done to him and had thought of him with so much regret, even recently. Had wondered if he was finally happy now.

This *asshole*.

"No, it's not funny at all, is it?" He shook his head, a sad smile painting his lips. "Did I plan for you to appear in my life? No. Did I take advantage of the fact that I finally had a chance to get back at you? Absolutely."

She couldn't help but shake out her own laugh in return. As if she hadn't had her reasons for what she'd done. She could defend herself, of course, but what she really needed to know was the full truth of what led them to this moment. Maybe then they could both stop this madness.

"And how did that work out for you? Do you feel better now that you've ruined my fucking life? I know I did some fucked up things, Ben, but this is my whole *career*. I hope it was worth it. Are you satisfied now, or is there more?" she sneered.

It came out nastier than she'd intended, but she wasn't exactly feeling rational.

He looked like he'd been kicked, suddenly.

"What do you think, Rey? Do I look fucking satisfied to you?"

She glared at the floor, eyes welling again. "No," she bit out sternly.

"Let me ask you something, Rey. Because maybe I had a different experience than you, or I'm fucking crazy."

"Go ahead."

He stared at her intently, eyes still shiny with his tears, more threatening to spill.

"Did you ever love me? Was I ever anything to you at all?" He placed his palms on the desk, like he was bracing himself for impact.

"How can you even ask me that after what you just did?"

He'd given her a job and subjected her to some of the worst people on the planet. She'd cried in bathroom stalls, endured eyerolls, interruptions, extra work, been made to feel like a complete idiot. And now he was asking if she ever loved him?

"Ben, I don't—I can't—"

She wondered suddenly if she'd underestimated the impact she'd had on him back then, and even now. She hadn't bothered to wait for the fire once she'd thrown the match behind her and fled the scene as quickly as she could.

But what choice did she have back then?

He stood up and rounded the desk, and she shifted backwards on her feet, startled by his sudden movement.

"I'm not talking about right now. I know what I did to you these past few weeks is totally fucked. I'm talking about back then. Did you ever feel something for me? Or was I just a joke to you all along?"

She laughed defensively. Was he kidding? Had she been the only one thinking of the consequences at the time if they'd been found out?

"It was never as simple as feelings and you know that. We couldn't be together even if we wanted to."

He slammed a palm down on the desk and she jumped at the sound. "*I did! I wanted it! Why didn't you?*"

She'd never been able to admit that it was a possibility. Not out loud, not even to herself. Since when had she been allowed to want things? To want people? To keep them before they slipped right through her fingers no matter how tight she held on?

"That's not fair! Have you forgotten that we're cousins, Ben? That we're fucking related? That our parents would have freaked the fuck out? You never listened. You just wanted to do whatever the fuck you wanted, no matter the consequences! You didn't even care what I wanted, and you just pushed and pushed until I had no choice but to—"

She had been screaming, she realized, her throat burning now that she'd stopped.

"You never thought about me either, Rey!" he shouted back, matching her energy. 'But I was *there*.' He pointed forcefully at the ground, as if 'there' was right in front of them. "I would have given up *everything* for you. But you left and never looked back. You didn't even give me a chance to *try*." His voice started to wobble again. "You didn't give *us* a chance."

She crossed her arms over her chest. It was easy to be angry at him, and rightly so—he deserved every bit of her wrath after what he'd just done to her. It was fucked all the way up.

"That's really rich, Ben. How dare you put all this on me especially after what you just did. You just *love* playing the victim, don't you?" She spread her arms wide, and raised her voice even higher. "Are you forgetting that you forced yourself on me at a party because I didn't agree with you?"

"Fuck!" he spat out. 'I know.' He ran his hand through his hair and paced back and forth as he spoke. "I just— I could never tell with you—one second you were all in and the next you were walking out of my goddamn life. I didn't know how else to get through to you and I was losing you and I just thought—"

He'd been desperate, she suddenly realized. She'd underestimated how hard he would hold onto her when she tried to flee.

It wasn't like when her dad had left her. She was just a little kid who couldn't stop him. Ben, on the other hand, had more power than she'd ever given him credit for. And oh how had he put it to use as soon as he'd been given the chance.

And yet, she too had a tremendous amount of power right now, she realized, watching him continue to cry. She was still angry, but if he really wanted to hurt her, he could have done so much worse. He was vulnerable before her, defeated.

So was she just going to keep kicking him while he was down? Fight him? Or worse, flee again?

He was in so much pain. And so was she. It was exhausting.

She shrugged. "This is what I'm talking about, Ben. We don't know how to do any of this. We just hurt each other."

"I know," he glanced up at her, hands on his hips as his lower lip trembled. "I know."

She could almost see herself through his eyes— his bully, the one who was supposedly in control. But he didn't know the power he held over her then and now.

And maybe she could have talked to him back then, and not done what her father had done to her. But there hadn't ever seemed to be an easy way out with him. He just didn't know when to quit. After all this time, they were right where they'd started.

"You know, I think you had me built up to be this monster that controlled everything. And sometimes I played that part, I know. I liked that you liked it when I was mean to you, and that you let me have that power over you. It felt good putting you in your place sometimes because you were such a pompous asshole back then. Like you were above needing to be liked and you just looked down on everyone. You probably thought fucking me over now would feel good because you believed it would prove I was beneath you in every way. You could finally win once and for all."

"That's not true, Rey. I mean some of it is. It felt good to have you, even if no one else saw it. That I wasn't just some loser everyone picked on. I was fucking the Queen Bitch of Johnson High. But I know now I was just *pretending* that I didn't care what anyone thought. That way the constant rejection wouldn't hurt so bad."

"You act like you had nothing when you had so many advantages that we didn't have, Ben. You had good grades, parents who loved and supported you, and you had money. You didn't have to be such a dick about it."

He rolled his eyes.

"Oh, so that justifies you and your friends treating me like a punching bag and humiliating me? You're saying it's my fault I got shoved into lockers and pantsed and thrown in the pool?"

"No! Of course not." she spat back. "But it explains it at least. And you liked it when I treated you like shit and then got to do it back. We both did."

Ben took a step closer. "Can you blame me for trying to have a little bit of control in that situation? For trying to survive what you all did to me? I did like it, Rey, and part of me still gets turned on by it. But I wanted more than that. And you just ran."

He might have a point. Their little game kept things safe for her. She didn't ever take him seriously or see it evolving beyond that. Both because they were cousins and because it didn't actually feel real. She could keep him at a distance and not feel responsible for his feelings or even treat him like a full human being. She didn't have to worry about being *nice*.

Most of all, even at her worst, he *still* wanted her. She couldn't say the same for her parents, then or now.

“But how was I supposed to know it was real, Ben? Did you ever really see me? Want *me*? Or just the idea of me? You ask if I ever loved you and here you admit that I was just a fucking game to you. A consolation prize for getting bullied.”

His voice softened as he spoke, the fight gone out of him.

“Maybe. I guess. I don’t know. At first I loved the game we played. I loved how I felt when we were alone. It may have started as a game, but I wanted it to be real. I wanted so much more. I didn’t know how to ask for more so I kept playing the stupid game even though you stopped. I was just a dumb kid.”

She stayed silent, letting his words roll over her, finally absorbing the message he’d been unable to communicate back then. The one she’d refused to hear because she wasn’t ready.

“But even if you can’t answer me. Even if you don’t feel the same, I know that I loved you, Rey.”

He was closer now, she realized, nearly towering over her. She could smell his soap, hear his breaths.

“I think deep down I still do.”

That admission was finally enough to shake her, to frighten her, even. That at the core of all of this was somehow *love*. And even if she tried to deny it, what had drawn her to him in the first place was that he’d wanted her then when she’d treated him so badly. She’d never felt deserving of that—her anger at the world and at their inability to be together had instead become a shield to keep out the pain of losing him. But instead it had only become a prison of her own making. It had kept her from so many things—from being happy.

“And I know I should hate you, but I can’t. I couldn’t even get revenge on you properly. It just made me feel sick to my stomach. When it came down to it, I just wanted *you*. I might not deserve your forgiveness, but if I can’t have that, I guess I just need to find another way to be free of this pain without you.”

She perked up, in spite of his seemingly mounting resignation.

“You just want me?” she croaked.

His eyes lit up as she zeroed in on that particular part of his statement.

“Just you,” he repeated.

She felt as if she were at a crossroads. She could repeat the past and walk out right now, knowing that even though they were like two grenades in a frying pan, that there had been love there, and that there still was. Exploring it for real, without the crutch of high school politics and the threat of family disapproval, was an actual possibility now that they were grown. But it could hurt even more, she reasoned. It could turn out even worse if they tried again. Because the stakes had never been higher: her freedom, her career, her *heart* could all be destroyed.

But walking away had not made her life better either. It had kept her stagnant and running in futile circles for years, chasing ephemeral success and self-sabotaging until she was barely making ends meet. She liked her job now, and she was proud of how far she’d finally come after being her own worst enemy for so long. She’d proven herself. She’d *earned* her place,

even if Ben's petty revenge plot was what had gotten her in the door. If anything, she'd already suffered enough. And in his desperate need to avenge the past, he had ironically ushered in the what had the potential to become the best era of her life.

She was so tired of feeling like a failure, like she'd blown her life up over and over again and would never recover.

For the first time in her life, she wanted to stay.

"I don't want to hurt you anymore, Ben. I don't want to hurt anyone anymore. I've come so far. I can't just give up on all of this. On myself."

He perked up, a glimmer of hope washing over his features.

"Then stay. Just stay this time. I don't want to lose you again, Rey. But I'm not going to force it this time. I want you to want this."

"I think I do, but I don't know—"

Was he seriously thinking they could still be together after everything that happened? Was she ready to finally give this a chance?

Nothing had ever felt more terrifying.

He reached for her hand, then the other, and pulled them into his warm grasp. "Look at me."

Reluctantly, she lifted her head, and felt tears race down her cheeks to flutter at the edges of her jaw and drop to places unknown.

"I don't know either. I've never been so scared. But I don't want to hurt you anymore either. Please just stay and we can try to figure it out together."

She paused for a moment, tears welling, and then met his eyes again.

In them was every answer she needed to know at that moment. That he loved her. That he believed they had a chance worth a damn.

That everything would be okay, eventually.

After a beat she nodded, slowly at first, and then faster as tears continued to well in her eyes. It wasn't long before pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly against his body. It was like she'd been standing on a cold, windy ledge for so long, and he'd just rescued her from plunging to her doom.

"I did love you. But I don't know if I really ever knew how," she murmured, her lips brushing the fabric stretched taut across his chest. "And I still don't. But I want to try."

He rubbed his chin gently on the top of her head, swaying their bodies back and forth.

"Thank you. That's all I needed to know," he responded in a near whisper, as he squeezed her tighter and placed a soft kiss on her crown.

And with that, she was no longer teetering on a precipice, dreading the howling void stretched out beneath her.

For the first time in a decade, the ground felt solid beneath her feet.

Chapter 13

After Ben had held her for a while, adrift in a sea of newly resurfaced emotions, she started to pull away. Fearful of losing the tenuous wisp of connection that they'd just formed, he blurted out an invitation back to his place.

And to his utter shock, she accepted.

Maybe, like him, she didn't want to be alone after everything that had just happened, or maybe, she wanted this to keep going just as much as he did.

He carried her bag for her and they walked to the elevator, a different one, though they both shifted uncomfortably on their feet as they made small talk,

"Where do you live?" she asked, her voice husky from crying.

"Upper East Side."

She snorted. "Of course."

"It's no big deal. I bet you won't be impressed at all."

She turned her chin up towards him, and it felt like the sun.

"You're probably right."

A deep chuckle escaped him, resounding in his chest.

It was good to be back.

They soon disembarked to the parking garage where his town car was waiting. Self-consciously, he nodded at his driver and opened the back door, gesturing for her to climb in.

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Well, I don't take the subway."

"I guess you wouldn't," she shrugged. "I'm going to keep making fun of you though, you bougie bastard."

"Fair enough," he smiled. "I deserve it."

It was comforting, her caring enough to make jokes at his expense. It was like home.

Once seated inside, she rubbed her arms. Her coat was thin and threadbare and it was just starting to get colder. He handed her his suit jacket, which he'd folded over his arm in a rush to get her out the door as soon as possible.

"No, that's okay."

"I remember how you always used to be cold. And you'd wear my sweatshirts around the house. Especially after—"

“Fine,” she huffed, grabbing it out of his hands. “Just can you hit pause on the memory lane stuff for a minute, though? I’m still um—”

“Adjusting?” he interrupted her.

She smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Sorry, I’ll slow down,” he offered, reaching over to brush a comforting palm over her knee.

“Thanks,” she murmured, ignoring his touch and stuffing her hands into the sleeves to wear his much too big for her blazer backwards like a blanket.

Once back at his apartment building, she refrained from commenting on the ostentatiousness of his lobby and they shared another quiet elevator ride up to his penthouse. He pressed his thumb into the keypad on the elevator console and the elevator opened directly into his apartment foyer.

“James Bond motherfucker,” she muttered under his breath.

“You love it,” he joked, gesturing for her to walk ahead of him.

She stepped tentatively into the hall, peering up, a bit stunned by the pair of Rothko paintings on the wall.

He started flipping on lights using his phone to illuminate her path towards the open plan living room and kitchen area.

“I can order something for you, or I have some fruit or cheese and crackers,” he asked. He knew she’d skipped dinner, so he didn’t bother asking if she was hungry.

“You don’t have to do that,” she insisted, only for the sound of her stomach growling to echo across the cold marble surfaces of his kitchen.

“So like I was saying,” he grinned, starting to pull things from the fridge and cabinets. “I’ll just pull together some things and if you want a meal I can order whatever you want.”

“You used to take care of me like this,” she mused softly. “Getting me snacks. Giving me your sweatshirt.” She peeled his blazer off of her arms and started removing her coat.

He pulled out a wooden serving board and started arranging strawberries and dried apricots and little squares of muenster and havarti with dill. A log of herbed goat cheese. He splayed out some parmesan crisps and miniature toasts along with some wheat crackers. A small jar of fig jam. This was turning out pretty good.

She tossed the coat on the back of a bar stool and pushed out another to sit on it.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Charcuterie board,” he said, peeling off circles of dried salami and turning his attention to the prosciutto that always thwarted his big, oafish fingers until he resigned himself to just tearing it to shreds. Presentation wasn’t his strong suit.

“This is a long way from Hot Cheetos and string cheese you used to bring me in bed.”

“I have those too if you want. I might be rich now, but I still have taste,” he joked.

“Then I want those too,” she replied, as if surprised. She shouldn’t be. He hadn’t changed all that much. Not in any way that mattered, or that had made a lick of difference in his life.

And now with her here, he didn’t want to be anyone else but the boy she’d almost let herself love.

He stared over at her then, suddenly realizing then that he simply wanted to give her everything.

Because for the first time in both of their lives, she was finally ready to take what he was offering.

And he never wanted to stop.

He paused, wiping his fingers on a dishtowel briefly before marching over to her and grasping her face with both hands.

“Rey. I love you, and I want to give you everything you’ve ever wanted. Because after everything that’s happened in my life, everything I’ve lost and gained, all I want is you.”

Rey burst into tears then, and he couldn’t help but kiss them as they fell. Each droplet warmed his lips as he crushed them to her skin and held fast for a moment before moving to the other side to catch another.

She clung to his wrists and accepted his affection without recoiling this time, and let herself sob freely. He pulled her closer until she slipped off the barstool, supporting her weight and holding her fast as she buried her face in his shirt.

He stroked her hair and tightened his grasp on her, wondering how he could have ever wanted to hurt this person in his arms. He felt more grateful than ever that his heart had not let him go past the point of no return.

He’d been stupid and selfish, however human.

And so, so very lucky.

“I want you too,” she whispered as he stroked her back. “That’s all I know how to say right now.”

She pulled away, wiping her tears with the heel of her palm before grabbing his hand. He waited with bated breath for her to change her mind.

“And I’m really hungry so can I eat your stupid overpriced charcuterie board now? It looks really, really good.”

He laughed softly, relief flooding his veins. “Yeah. I’ll make you some tea, go ahead.”

When she rounded the corner of the kitchen island to dig in, he blinked away his own tears and went to seek out the chamomile and honey from his cabinet.

After they moved to the couch, they chatted about nothing and everything while sipping their tea. How their parents were doing, how they’d managed to avoid each other the last ten Christmases, how much they both missed California.

She accepted his college sweatshirt, and his inner nineteen year old beamed with excitement at the way it fell almost to her knees and how she dug her thumbs through the little holes at the wrists.

They talked about their old dog BeeBee, who'd passed away when they were in college, and their old teachers. This was the Rey she let herself be on those nights after they'd had sex and she'd linger in his room, leaving her shampoo scent on his pillow and strands of her hair for him to find later.

They talked until they ran out of things to say, pausing to stare into each others eyes for a moment.

"It's late," Rey remarked, rising to stretch. "I should probably go—"

"Stay—" he interrupted shamelessly. "I have an extra toothbrush and I'll sleep on the couch."

"I shouldn't," she said unconvincingly.

"Since when have we ever cared about things we shouldn't do?" he insisted with a sly smile.

She blushed, lashes fluttering against her cheeks. "I mean, it is a long subway ride."

"I wouldn't make you take the subway, Rey. But I don't want you to go."

She glanced up at him, face unsure. This was the side of her he wasn't used to. The one that asked for permission and feared hearing no. It warmed him toward her even more, that she'd suffered so much, just in different ways than he had, and that that chapter of their lives might finally be over.

"Okay, but can we just take it easy? Like just sleeping?"

"Of course."

He stood up and led her by the hand to his room, and his master suite, pulling out a new brush and toothpaste for her. "All yours. I'll give you some privacy."

"Thanks," she responded. "This is weird. It's almost like nothing's changed, like when we used to brush our teeth together."

"Yeah? I kinda like it."

"That's because you're a weirdo," she laughed, uncapping the toothpaste. "Just brush your teeth, it's fine. I'm just—"

"Adjusting?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "I feel like I will be for a while."

He shrugged and grabbed his own brush from the medicine cabinet. "I don't know. I missed you." He spread some toothpaste on his brush, poising it before his mouth. "I don't need to adjust. But it's okay if you do." He began to scrub his teeth. It did feel like he'd hopped in a time machine.

"I missed you too. Now that we're here it's like something is back in place that wasn't there a few hours ago. I didn't know it was missing but I know that it's back."

"I know what you mean," he replied, spitting into the sink.

He knew it couldn't be this simple, just two people brushing their teeth like they'd always done. Snapping back to their former comfort level in an instant, as if no time had passed. Some things would be easy, like this, and others wouldn't. They still had a long way to go.

But it was something.

They finished cleaning up and returned to the bedroom, suddenly faced with his massive, perfectly made bed. His headboard was black tufted velvet and his sheets were black and silky with a dark gray comforter. He even had the silly little decorative pillows with thick embroidery and heavy tassels.

"This is a fuck palace," she stated matter of factly.

He couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, well. What can I say?"

"You're not seeing anyone are you?" She looked pained at the thought.

"No," he shook his head, eager for her to know. She was it for him, and it was only hitting him more and more how very much he did not want anyone else at this moment and might not ever again.

"Me neither. I mean, not that it matters. I'm just— just making sure."

"You okay?"

"No," she responded truthfully. "But I'm working on it."

She hadn't been aware of him until a few hours ago. He'd had so much more time to live with her reemergence in his life. He made a mental note to give her more grace, and give her time to acclimate. He carried on, suddenly feeling excited at the prospect of sharing his bed with her again, even if nothing happened. It felt so innocent, practically pure. Just to be close to her again. To have her trust.

"Let's try to get some sleep. You want shorts or anything?"

"No need. You still sleep on the right side?"

"Yep," he confirmed, taking off his watch and setting it on the valet on his dresser and then starting to undress. "You still sleep without socks on?"

"Yep," she replied, peeling off her pants and socks and tossing them on the floor. She undid the buttons on her shirt underneath the sweatshirt, shimmied her arms out of its giant sleeves without taking it off and peeled off her work shirt beneath it. She added it to the pile and slid her arms back into the sweatshirt like Houdini.

He was eighteen again. Rey was standing there in just his sweatshirt, her knobby knees and bare legs and bare feet poking out, her hands covered by the cuffs. Her hair was mussed, her makeup gone, and her freckles were especially visible.

"You look beautiful."

“Shut the fuck up,” she laughed, shaking her head before peeling back the crisp sheets and yanking out the perfect hospital corners. She burrowed under the covers like a rodent, bunching them up around her, just her head poking out.

He unceremoniously removed his own clothes down to his boxer briefs, donned a black t-shirt and basketball shorts, and made his way toward the bed. Her eyes followed as he slowly peeled back the covers and slid into bed, barely disturbing them.

He tossed the decorative pillows to the floor and adjusted his pillows behind his head, folding his arms over his chest.

“Can you hold me?” she asked nervously. “You don’t have to.”

“Come here,” he offered, and she didn’t hesitate to snuggle next to him, resting her head on his chest.

Home.

He grabbed his phone to quickly turn off the lights, which had escaped her notice earlier.

“You control your lights with your fucking phone?”

“So?”

“You’re—”

“I’m what?” he asked, tickling her ribs.

She giggled uncontrollably. “You’re a rich assho—”

He tickled her some more until she begged for mercy. Then they both settled down, grins plastering their faces.

“Goodnight,” she mumbled into his chest. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“I’m not sure, just needed to say it.”

“You’re welcome.”

His mind swirled for a while as she began to snore softly in his arms.

This felt too good to be true, and he briefly wondered if she would still be there when he woke.

Part of him felt like even if she did sneak out, he would still be happy that they had this night. Even if they failed, they’d at least tried this time.

It was all he’d ever wanted.

Chapter 14

At precisely seven o'clock, Ben's automatic shades ascended, letting the golden glow of early sunrise illuminate his entire bedroom.

Rey groaned in his arms and pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over her face.

"It's Saturday," she grumbled into the crook between his neck and shoulder, her breath warm on his skin. "What the fuck."

He grabbed his phone and with a few swipes they were descending once more.

"That better?"

"Yes, asshole," she murmured.

She'd never been a morning person.

He remembered the one time they'd let this happen when they were younger, on a school night no less. Leia had left especially early that day for work and Rey's mom was working the graveyard shift.

Once she'd realized, she'd burst out of his bed, cursing him, gathering her clothes and swearing to make his life hell that day. But in that sweet interim between waking up and before he'd woken her, he'd felt her snuggle into him. Her drool made a little puddle on his t-shirt, and her thigh was wedged between his legs.

She'd felt like she was *his*.

And now, she was still in his arms, no running away this time. She settled back in as the room plunged back into soft gray darkness.

Her hair smelled the same as it always did. She must have not changed her shampoo. He pressed his nose to her crown and inhaled deeply, and a calm sensation washed over him.

Home.

She stirred in his arms.

"Are you smelling me?"

He laughed nervously. "You caught me."

"And?"

Hooking a finger under her chin, he tipped her face up to him. The hood fell away, revealing her tangled bedhead.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked, still treading lightly, remembering her panic last night.

"Okay."

He was tentative, which surprised him, given not only their history, but the unhinged way he'd pursued her the night prior, like a gambler with nothing left to lose.

But now he felt like he held so much promise and their futures in this one small moment. It was silly, really, but it was like the foundation of everything they could possibly have was being built between their lips.

"Mmm," she murmured into his mouth, curling her leg around his hip, squirming closer as she threaded her fingers into his hair.

And then they were back. It was natural, the way their bodies moved together, finding each other after all this time.

His hands traveled to her waist and she rolled on top of him, taking the opportunity to peel his giant sweatshirt over her head.

Golden strands of light crept through the edges of the window shades to paint her pebbled skin. He warmed it with his hands, reaching upwards to caress her neck, coast down her breasts and stomach and then wrap around her waist.

And then she was back for another kiss, pressing her chest to his, grinding against him like she needed to, letting him trace the delicate knobs of her spine with his fingertips.

"I want you," she whispered against his lips as she rolled onto the mattress beside him and shimmed her panties down her hips.

"Fuck," he whispered out of disbelief and already overcome with lust.

Real desire, not the manic, desperate seeking and claiming of the night prior. It was the true manifestation of the deep seated longing he had so recently mistaken for hatred.

"Fuck," she rasped in return, her voice husky as she rose back into his lap, grinding against his thick, hardened length.

She braced her hands on his chest and teasingly rolled her hips, taking some pleasure for herself before slowly scratching her nails down his torso.

"Can you take these off?" she asked coyly, fingers stopping just short of his waistband.

"You can," he offered, lazily stroking her thighs.

He was in no rush. Their earlier trysts had been driven by secrecy and urgency, and he'd been so clumsy and so desperate to cling to every shred of what she'd given him. He'd never taken the time to really enjoy it.

It was enough to bring tears to the cusp of spilling.

She didn't see, thankfully, too busy with the untying of the short drawstring of his silky basketball shorts. As she drew down the elastic, he lifted his hips and let her slowly reveal him until he was bared to her completely.

"Is this okay?" she asked, grasping him in her fist and notching him at her slick entrance, already poised above him like a hovering angel.

He nodded, his grasp on her thighs tightening as she sunk down, and they both inhaled sharply.

It was strange, to take the time. To focus on each other like this. To take it all in.

It didn't mean it would always be this way. So cautious, so intentional. So deliberate. But it was like meeting her for the first time, the polite newness of it.

Hello. I'm Ben.

"Come here," he said, once she was fully seated, and he felt closer to her than he ever had in his life. Naturally he wanted to kiss her.

She leaned forward slowly, and he could see that she was also starting to cry, even as her hips moved, and the gentle rocking motion eked the most exquisite pleasure out of him.

"I love you," he whispered, both thumbs wiping her tears away.

"I love you too."

He kissed her lips and her forehead, and stroked her hair.

"Can you—" she started timidly.

He waited, hands sliding down her back as she nestled her face in the crook of his shoulder. He felt her tighten and a small whimper escaped his lips.

"Can you take over?" she asked.

"Yeah," he responded, hands tightening on her waist, pulling her hips up and down, facilitating the slow, delicious slide of his cock in and out of her wet heat.

With one hand on the back of her neck and the other on her waist he rolled on top of her without breaking their bond, and for the first time in his life he knew what people meant by *making love*.

They were making their love anew, brick by brick, solid and true. It had already withstood so much, and now he knew it always would.

It felt less strange, and more right, and more overwhelmingly good.

"I love fucking you," he admitted without reservation. "I missed this. I missed you."

"I love fucking you too," she replied with a moan for emphasis. "Feels so fucking good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, fuck me! Fuck!" she cried as he thrust harder and faster, emboldened by the unexpected praise.

After so long he wondered if the key to his arousal and attraction to her wasn't how she *treated* him but simply how she made him *feel*? The sensation of her skin on his and the sound of her voice washing over him, and the way she let him in so deeply, even when she fought it with every fiber of her being?

The pleasure was immense, because it was real and true and he felt *free*. Free from the past, free from their mistakes.

They were finally free.

“Gonna come,” he grunted, breaths sharp and quick.

“Me too, don’t stop,” she begged, snaking a hand between their bodies to ensure her release.

“I can feel you— s-so tight. Fuck.”

“Please! Ben! Fuck me, fuck me, feels so fuckin’ good don’t stop!”

They carried on like this, lips brushing, breaths mingling, until their eyes met, and they both let go at the same time.

It was like time froze, molecules suspended in space around them.

He held her for a long while after, and probably a little too tightly.

“I have to pee,” she said softly, gently tapping the arm that held her captive.

He kissed the top of her head and released her, watching her heart-shaped ass bounce with nothing short of undying admiration as she retreated to the ensuite.

Ben blew out a breath and let the tears flow for a moment so he could pull himself together before she returned.

In a few minutes, she would be back in his arms again.

They were back.

She emerged from the ensuite, wrapped in a towel with wet hair, like she’d already made herself at home. His heart glowed, warm and fuzzy in his chest.

He sat up in bed, excited. “Do you want breakfast? You can stay the weekend if you want. I can run out and get you some things to wear.”

She stood frozen, staring at him as if confused, until her lips started to tremble and her nose reddened.

“What’s wrong?”

“I-I don’t know,” she stammered. “I think I might need to go home.”

“It’s okay, you can stay as long as you want.”

“I-I think I need time to think.”

Her eyes searched the room until they found her pile of discarded clothes and she darted over to them.

That struck a chord of fear in him. Think about what? Did she not feel what he’d felt? Had he read it all wrong? Had he pushed too hard again and fucked it all up?

She had said that she needed time to adjust and here he was pressuring her again.

He stood up, his shorts already refastened. Panic rose in his chest like a blooming cloud of smoke.

“Please. Rey. I can’t lose you again just please. Don’t leave. Don’t leave me.”

She twirled back towards him with her armful of clothes, eyes trained on the bathroom again, as if she wanted to hide in there.

“Don’t say it like that. I’m not— It’s just. I feel hot. Is it hot in here?” She pawed at her own chest. “My skin feels too tight.”

He reached for her.

“You’re just— just take a minute and breathe.”

She recoiled. “Stop being nice to me.”

Fuck.

“Why would I—”

Her face crumpled into tears again.

“Why do you still love me? I’m horrible. I hurt you over and over—” She hid her face in her small bundle of clothing as she choked out a deep sob.

He approached her cautiously, gently reaching to pull her hands away from her face, until she looked him in the eye.

He wanted to make her feel safe. He wanted her to know what he knew: that from now on, he would always be there for her, no matter what. Even if she changed her mind and decided she hated him again.

“The same reason you love me. Because we’re the only ones that know how. You see me, Rey. You’re the only one that ever has. And I see you. And I know you. And I love who you are more than anything else in this world.”

To his relief, she dropped her clothes and dove into his chest, sobbing all of her pain into the warmth of his shirt.

“This is hard, Ben. I want to be here and it’s hard.” She paused and peered up at him. “Are you really sure that you want this?”

He smoothed her hair away from her face and brushed away her tears with his knuckle.

“I’m sure. Would it help if I said it more? How much I want this? How much I want you?”

She nodded. “I think so. I’ll say it more too.”

“That would make me feel good if you did. I have the same doubts and fears as you, Rey. But please don’t doubt my love for you. And I’ll try my best not to give you a reason to.”

She nodded again, eyes welling, and rested her head on his chest once more. To his relief, she let him hold her for a little while.

“I think I still need to go home,” she said, pulling away after a few minutes of silent swaying. He held her fast.

“Are you sure? Because you can stay as long as you want. I mean it. I want you here.”

“Yeah, it’s enough just to hear you say it.”

“Good. I’m glad. Whatever you need to do.”

“Thank you.”

She pulled away again and this time, he released his grip on her, mindful of his tendency to hold on too tight. She was being so brave asking for what she needed and wanted, and he’d promised to give her that.

“I’ll order you a Lyft.”

“Yup, you don’t have to do that,” she replied, a smile forming.

It was contagious, and he felt his shoulders drop with relief, the heaviness lifted. “I know. I want to.”

“Fine,” she acquiesced with an eye roll. “I’m gonna get dressed.” She scooped up her clothes and retreated to the bathroom again. While she was occupied, he ran to the kitchen and gathered some Kind bars and coconut water to sneak into her tote bag.

To his surprise, she initiated the exchange of phone numbers. It helped him tolerate the pang in his chest when he escorted her to her Lyft and she gave him a short peck goodbye.

He waved her off as the morning chill lessened and the sun warmed his back.

It had been good, and new, and different, and there was so much to be excited about.

But what if this was just a one time thing?

What if given the space she craved, she got scared and gave up again? What if she didn’t want this as much as he did?

What if there is too much fucked up shit to overcome?

His phone buzzed in his pocket, startling him.

Thanks for the granola bars, you fuckin loser.

Finally, he lets himself smile, and take a full breath. Every doubt was instantly whisked away like steam dissipating into thin air.

You’re welcome, asshole.

I prefer slut.

Sorry, you’re welcome, you whore.

That’s more like it. I love you.

Ben practically skipped back to his apartment as he texted *I love you too*.

She was back, and she was herself, and she was *his*.

Chapter 15

*****Rey*****

Rey came home in a flurry, hours after Ben, who through virtue of his position at the company, could come and go as he pleased.

It had been a year of taking it slow until one day, they crashed into each other like two freight trains, had a huge fight about something so stupid she couldn't even remember what it was.

And then he asked her to move in. To a house. In the suburbs.

Of course she said yes, even if it scared the ever living fuck out of her.

Loving Ben had never been hard.

It was the whole *receiving* thing.

He still got nervous when she didn't come home with him in his town car, or said she was going to the movies alone.

She still got nervous when he'd smile at married couples with babies in the park or when he'd linger in front of jewelry store windows in the mall.

They'd gone home for Christmas for the first time in years and their mothers had been absolutely ecstatic, and didn't even question why they'd come together after all this time. Enduring the endless questions about their love lives and embarrassing childhood stories had been worth fucking on every surface in the pool house until dawn.

Back in the present, Ben was whisking something around in a dutch oven.

"What are you making?"

The kitchen was in disarray, several pots and pans bubbling on the stove, and the house was a few degrees warmer than usual, thanks to the oven.

He had a smudge of flour on his cheek and a dish towel on his shoulder.

"Artichoke soup with fresh quail eggs and coq au vin," he said hastily while opening the oven. I made some fresh rosemary focaccia and herbed butter with sea salt."

Rey snorted. "God, you're so pretentious."

"Sorry, I'm trying to impress your asshole friends, sweetheart," he retorted with a lazy smile, pausing to wipe his hands on his dish towel and pull her in for a kiss. In the process, he managed to lift her up off the ground with only one arm.

"You couldn't if you tried," she joked.

"I already did when they saw my giant dick at your stupid pool party," he deadpanned, turning his attention to his soup pot to drizzle in extra virgin olive oil followed by a pinch of

overpriced salt flakes.

“Most of them haven’t set foot outside an Applebee’s or a Chuck E. Cheese in years. I don’t know why you even bother. You don’t care what they think, do you?” she asked, reaching to pull off a corner of freshly baked focaccia. ‘Oh, are you planning on poisoning them?’ She took a nibble. It was really fucking good. “And your dick is above average but I wouldn’t say *giant*,” she teased.

“Keep talking and I’ll make you suck it in front of them,” he threatened playfully, slapping her ass as he turned down one of the burners.

“You’d love that wouldn’t you, fuckin’ perv,” she laughed, dodging a second blow.

“Why wait?”

He turned on a dime and cornered her against the nearby sink, boxing her in with both hands on the counter.

Rey ducked under one of his big arms and darted towards the living room, but to no avail. He quickly caught up to her and barred an arm around her waist, spinning her around as she kicked and squealed.

Returning to the center island with his prize, he swept some mail and various measuring cups and spoons onto the floor and placed her face down, bent over the white marble surface.

She gave a halfhearted pantomime of resistance, smiling to herself as he wrenched her arms behind her back. He grasped both wrists in one hand as she squirmed, unable to stop him from flipping up her skirt and yanking her panties down.

“If you don’t wanna suck it you can take it instead, how bout that?” he growled, throwing in a few quick spanks for good measure before he slid his engorged head along her greedy slit.

“Make me,” she replied, panting heavily as she braced herself for a good pounding.

“I hardly have to try you’re so fucking wet. Such a needy little slut you are.” He plunged in easily, grasping one of her shoulders as he held fast to her wrists with his other hand.

“They’re gonna be here any minute, not that you’re gonna last that long,” she teased.

“Oh, you’d love that. You want them to see how lucky you are to get fucked by me whenever I see fit? See what a little whore you are?”

“They’d probably be bored,” she smiled wickedly as the air left her lungs on the last word.

“Brave talk for someone who’s about to get fucked in front of all of her friends. Is that a car door I hear?”

She squirmed, still defiant.

“You’re too chicken shit to keep going.”

The sound of muffled voices traveled through the front door.

Shit.

He thrust in deep and fast, pulling both arms behind her, rendering her completely helpless.

“Looks like Rose and Hux are here. How about now, huh? Do I seem chicken shit?”

“Fuck!” she shrieked as he pulled her up to standing. He yanked the front of her dress down, exposing one breast and turned both of their bodies towards the front door.

“What do you think?” he breathed in her ear. “Is it locked?”

Her friends had been known to just barge in with bottles of wine and casserole dishes, and make themselves right at home. They *could* just walk in.

She started to feel panicky, and yet it only added to her mounting desire and excitement.

Ben slowly pulled out her other breast and threaded her nipples through his fingers.

“What do you want more? To come or to avoid being fucked like a slut for everyone to see?”

It was too much. They were on the porch.

He bent her forward and held her by the biceps as he plowed her from behind. “Fuck. Gonna come. I should make you get on your fuckin’ knees you dirty fuckin’ whore.”

Her orgasm ripped through her as the knob started to turn. Ben followed not far behind, burying himself deep.

Eyes widening in fear, she scrambled to put her tits away and pawed at his hips behind her as he continued pumping her full of hot cum.

“Ben! Hurry the fuck up”

“Relax,” he replied, his voice husky. “I locked the deadbolt.”

“You what?” She twirled around, feeling his cum dribble down her inner thighs and slapped him on the chest.

He grinned devilishly as he put himself away and refastened his pants.

“Well, don’t be rude, go answer it,” he insisted, walking to the sink to wash his hands.

“I have cum streaming down my legs, so I’ll be upstairs for a little while. Enjoy playing host, jerkoff,” she retorted, with a slap to his little pancake stack of an ass.

“Ah, you win,” he sighed dramatically. “Put on something slutty. No panties. I wanna finger you during Apples to Apples.”

She flipped him the bird and ran up the stairs as Hux started jamming on the doorbell. Served Ben right.

Rose and Hux were back together *again* and had moved to New York for Rose’s job in pharmaceutical sales, Jannah had a new girlfriend named Zorii she met at trivia night at the bar they frequented for Friday happy hours, Kaydel found a nice guy with his own kids who didn’t mind her taking a quick weekend trip across the country to hang out with her friends, and Finn and Poe had their own real estate agency in the Hamptons.

Her friends had figured it out, and so had she.

She didn't have to miss California anymore, or her friends, or Ben.

For the first time in her life, she was home.

They had a cute little craftsman house a quick train ride from the city, though Ben preferred her to drive with him. They had board games. And way too many reusable grocery bags, and a shared Netflix password. That night would be the first dinner party of many.

No one seemed to remember that Ben was her cousin and Rey didn't remind them, but her friends had all taken a quiet opportunity of their own accord to apologize for being such dicks in high school.

She often wondered what would happen if they told everyone, if they'd ever have a normal life, but she knew that there was no other option.

Later that night, as they cleaned up wine glasses and scraped plates, it hit her that they were closer than they'd ever been, and yet so far away.

There had been steps forward, and backward. Things they'd had to learn, like communicating their needs and setting boundaries. Learning when to be kind and knowing when they didn't have to be.

"You okay? You're quiet," Ben asked as he wiped down the stovetop.

"Yeah, tonight was fun."

"You're not mad about earlier right? You liked it?" He'd learned to check in, never taking for granted that she was happy. Which made her the happiest she'd ever been. It made her feel safe in a way that she never had before.

"No, it was fucking hot," she laughed. "I'm just thinking about how far we've come."

"And that's making you cry?"

"Shit, am I crying?" she set a dish down in the sink.

He walked over to her, pulling her into his protective embrace, and she instantly melted into him, her cheek fitting perfectly into the divot between his chest and shoulder like a puzzle piece.

"You can tell me," he said softly, with a tinge of worry, like he still feared he'd done something wrong.

"Are we ever going to be normal? Like tell our parents?"

He stiffened a bit. "Why does it matter if we tell them?"

She looked up at him. "What if we want to— I just was thinking—"

"Rey," he smiled. "Are you proposing?"

She giggled and blew out a breath. "No, jerkoff I'm not proposing. I'm just saying— will we ever just be able to be us without having to hide it?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends. I never worried about that, I guess. I just wanted you and that was all that mattered. I know it bothered you though. But they can't do anything about it now, can they? We're free."

She sniffled. He was right in a way. No one could stop them, not now. It was her fear of being shamed, of having him ripped away that kept her from really letting herself have this. To have any love at all, really. But Ben had proven himself over and over.

"I guess I really don't give a shit what my mom thinks. But what about yours? I can't stand the thought of Leia being ashamed of me. Of us."

"My mom loves you. And me. As long as we promise not to have flipper babies I wouldn't worry too much about her."

"You are so stupid," she laughed. No, she didn't want kids.

She had everything she needed.

"So do you feel a little bit better then?" he looked down at her hopefully, stroking a strand of hair off of her forehead before curling it behind her ear.

"I think so. Getting there. Maybe. This Christmas might be weird."

"Let's make it as weird as possible," he smiled, his eyes watery. He pulled away and started to drop down to the floor.

"Ben, what are you—"

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a little velvet box.

Her eyes welled, and her heart threatened to explode out of her chest.

This wasn't possible.

She didn't get to keep him, did she?

"Yes."

"I haven't even opened the box yet, or said my little speech, Rey."

"Oh, sorry."

He cracked it open, and a modest round solitaire diamond sparkled in the dim light of the kitchen.

"I've loved you since I was a kid, Rey. I've been carrying this ring around for six months, telling myself not to push, not to scare you away. I wanted to be sure that you wanted this. But I think you and I both know that this is where we belong." His eyes glimmered and he pressed his lips together before he continued. "You and me against the world. I love you more than my own life. I never want to know a life that doesn't have you in it. I will take care of you, I will give you everything you want and need, and more. I am just so thankful that you came back into my life and I get a chance to tell you all of this."

As the tears streamed down her face, she regarded this man, who was once the boy who was her friend. Whose love she struggled to accept, and tested and discarded, even though it

was the one thing she wanted most in this world. Oh, what a gift to have it back. To be able to say yes in this moment, and every day forward.

Rey lowered to her own knees and closed her hand around both of his, though they barely managed to wrap around them.

“Ben. My answer is yes because I never want to know a life without you in it either. I’m sorry that we had to go through so much pain to get here, but there is no doubt in my mind that you are my person. No one understands me like you. No one puts up with me the way they do. No one lights a fire in my soul and keeps me humble the way you do. I will never ever stop loving you as long as I live. My answer is yes now and until the day I die.”

He pulled the ring out and placed it on her finger hastily, and then grabbed her face with both hands to press his lips to hers. Salty, sweet kisses, and love building and flowing and multiplying exponentially, filling her veins and every aching empty cavity in her entire being until her heart was so full it finally felt safe and at peace.

A love like this didn’t need anyone’s blessing or approval. Nothing mattered but these two sets of hands, these two sets of lips, these two hearts, these two souls.

“I don’t need a wedding,” she finally spoke when their lips finally parted. “I have everything I need.”

“Well, we’ll need paperwork and stuff,” he smiled wanly.

“You fucking nerd,” she laughed, and he laughed with her.

“Courthouse? You can wear whatever you want.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Okay,” he breathed what could only be interpreted as a sigh of relief.

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her all the way to the bedroom.

******Ben******

Caring had always been a risk. But this time it had been worth it.

Their wedding day was the most joyful of his life. His driver was their only witness, and they’d shoved cupcakes in each other’s faces outside a small Italian bakery in the village.

They honeymooned on the Amalfi Coast, and she’d never looked more beautiful, tanned by the Italian sun, lips always glistening with the remnants of a delicious meal or a perfect glass of wine, barefoot in sundresses, hair sparkling in the sun.

When they returned home, he laid the groundwork to step down from his position as CEO and start a consulting business. Rey would never have to worry about her career, or have to keep their marriage a secret. She would get to have everything she worked so hard for, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I can’t believe it’s your last day,” she remarked, standing in Ben’s packed up office. “So long to the great Kylo Ren, huh?”

“Good riddance,” he smirked. “But I do have one last order of business, Mrs. Solo,” he replied, locking the door.

“Oh, and what is that?”

“First, I have a little gift for you, then I’m going to fuck you raw on my desk, and maybe against the windows. How does that sound, little wife of mine?”

She visibly shivered, spots of pink forming on her cheeks.

“Sounds good, now give me my present,” she laughed, reaching out with grabby hands.

He clicked his tongue and opened a box near the door to pull out a small gift bag. “Here you go, greedy. I was gonna make you work for it, but hopefully you know how to properly show your gratitude.”

“Gimme!” she demanded, grasping the bag by its silky ribbon handles.

He watched patiently like a proud parent on Christmas morning as she pulled out the white mug with simple black lettering.

“World’s Best Engineer,” she read slowly. “Ben?”

Her eyes welled with tears. “How did you know?”

He’d watched her for hours on those stupid security cameras. How she’d run her fingers over the mugs in the communal kitchen or stare at others’ longingly while she cradled her own disintegrating paper cup. How she’d always, without fail, make a mess trying to put the lids on.

“I figured it was time. It’s a real big dick move, having your own mug. Only the hot shit, highly regarded employees tend to have these.”

Rey had been promoted several times over the past year, and he’d stayed out of the way. He’d transferred her boss, Amilyn, to another reporting line and slowly started recusing himself from anything HR-related so there would never a risk of tarnishing her reputation or her advancement.

She ran her thumb over the raised lettering, her eyes shining.

“This is the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me in my whole life.”

And he knew she meant it.

“Nicer than a diamond ring and a trip to Italy, huh?”

“Yeah, you’re pretty dumb, you totally could have just gotten me this mug,” she laughed in return as he stepped closer.

Bane of my existence.

“Smart mouths need to be taught a lesson, hmm?”

“Yes, sir,” she rolled her eyes and nestled her mug safely away in its gift bag.

“Good, now get on your knees, slut.”

“Make me, nerd.”

What they’d both done in the past had molded and shaped them into who they were today. It had split them in two, and somehow still managed to lead them back to each other. It had taken losing her and nearly losing himself to appreciate what they’d had all along: the deepest understanding that another human being could ever give another.

It occurred to him that *he* hadn’t won, but that *they* had. They both fought hard to become who they were now and be the best version of themselves for each other. Their prize was a love that comes along once in a million years. Something worth losing everything for, as long as they didn’t lose each other.

And he knew with all of his heart that they never would.

“I fucking love you, Rey Solo,” he declared with the utmost sincerity.

“I fucking love you too, Benjamin Solo. What are you waiting for, take out your big, perfect dick and fuck my face or do I have to do it myself?”

Love of my fucking life.